



# COVID-19 Vaccine: Guidance for Syringe Services Programs, Health Departments, and People Who Use Drugs

April 2021

## COVID-19 Vaccine Overview

Health departments across the country are working to make COVID-19 vaccines available to populations at higher risk of experiencing serious complications or illness. Partnering with syringe services programs (SSPs) for vaccine distribution is one way to increase access to COVID-19 vaccines among people who use drugs and others underserved by traditional healthcare systems. The following recommendations are based on experiences from SSPs in the United States and includes strategies for involving SSPs and health departments in vaccine distribution, increasing vaccine access among SSP staff and participants, and supporting people who use drugs throughout the vaccination process.

### Background on Vaccine Development

Three vaccines have received FDA Emergency Use Authorizations for COVID-19 prevention: Moderna, Pfizer/BioNTech, and Johnson & Johnson/Janssen. Clinical trial data show all three vaccines are safe and effective at preventing COVID-19, as well as severe illness, hospitalizations, and death from the disease. All three vaccines were tested in tens of thousands of adults from diverse backgrounds, including older adults, communities of color, and people living with chronic disease. Vaccines do not use the live virus that causes COVID-19 and a person

cannot get infected with COVID-19 from getting vaccinated. Vaccine side effects can include symptoms such as fever, chills, headaches, muscle and body aches, fatigue, and sore arm (from the injection). In most cases, side effects are short-term and are normal signs that your body is building protection (some people will experience no side effects). For more information about vaccine side effects, including when to contact a healthcare provider about any side effects you may be experiencing, visit the [CDC website](#). COVID-19 safety guidelines like social distancing and wearing face masks are still recommended for vaccinated individuals while in public spaces to protect themselves and others. However, [CDC guidance](#) states that once individuals are fully vaccinated (two weeks after the second dose of Moderna or Pfizer or two weeks after the single Johnson & Johnson dose), they can gather indoors with others who are fully vaccinated without wearing a mask. For fully vaccinated individuals, the CDC guidelines also state that it is safe to gather indoors with others from one other household who are not vaccinated (unless those individuals or people they live with are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19). The CDC continues to update recommendations to federal, state, and local governments regarding populations to prioritize for vaccine access. In addition, each state is responsible for developing a vaccine

distribution plan, including information about which groups are eligible to receive the vaccine and in what order. Please check with your state and local health departments for updated COVID-19 vaccination plans.

### Guidance for SSPs and Harm Reduction Programs

- Educate participants and build confidence on vaccine effectiveness, safety, availability, and potential side effects (understanding that side effects may be similar to withdrawal symptoms in some cases). It is important to support individuals to make their own choices and respect others' autonomy regarding their decision to get vaccinated. If staff or participants have been vaccinated, it can be beneficial for them to share with others about their experiences and their reasons for choosing to get vaccinated (similar to [vaccine ambassador programs](#)). Hosting educational events in the community can also help provide accurate information and address concerns about the vaccine.
- For individuals who choose not to get vaccinated at this time, emphasize the ways they can still keep themselves and others safe (wearing face masks, social distancing, frequent testing).
- Develop plans with participants about securing a safe space to rest after vaccine administration.
- Collaborate with local and state health authorities to advocate for opportunities for people who use drugs to serve on state or local vaccine advisory boards or committees.
- Partner with state and local health departments for involvement with vaccine rollout and distribution plans,

including SSPs serving as vaccine distribution sites.

- Explore partnerships with local medical or nursing students/classes to help with vaccine distribution and administration at SSPs.
- Be familiar with vaccine eligibility requirements established by your state and local health departments. According to the CDC, most state plans do not specify whether substance use disorder (SUD) would be prioritized in earlier phases of vaccine distribution. However, some individuals with SUD may live in congregate settings, which might make them eligible for prioritized vaccine access due to high transmission rates in these settings. [CDC recently added SUD to the list of medical conditions that can lead to increased risk of becoming more severely ill with COVID-19.](#)
- Advocate for SSP staff, volunteers, and participants to get access to vaccines as they become available. Designating SSPs as essential services may increase vaccine access among staff and volunteers. Smaller programs may be able to classify participants as volunteers or health care workers (i.e., for participants' roles as overdose responders, involvement in secondary exchange, etc.), which may make them eligible for the vaccine in some cases.
- Provide supplies to participants that may help with potential vaccine side effects, such as heating pads/packs, ice packs, and over-the-counter pain medication.
- If possible, offer for peers, staff, or volunteers to go to vaccine appointments with participants.
- Offer to secure participants' vaccine cards at the SSP. Smartphone apps, such as [v-safe](#), can also store an individual's

vaccine information and send appointment reminders for the next dose.

### Strategies for Public Health Agencies and Partners

- [Partner with SSPs](#) and other harm reduction programs for vaccine rollout and distribution plans to increase access among SSP staff, volunteers, and participants. Health department staff may be able to distribute vaccines at fixed SSP sites and/or on mobile units.
- Consider prioritizing the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for people who use drugs since only one dose/one appointment is needed. However, vaccination for this group should not be delayed based on availability of one-dose vaccines, as strong partnerships with SSPs, harm reduction programs, and other organizations can help ensure that people who use drugs receive their second dose.
- Disseminate educational materials on vaccine effectiveness, safety, and eligibility to SSPs. Inform SSPs of any changes in vaccine eligibility that may increase access among staff and participants (i.e., if PWUD or people with SUD become populations eligible for vaccine priority in your area).
- Provide additional supplies to SSPs if available, including water, over-the-counter pain medication, heating pads/packs, and ice packs.

### Considerations for People Who Use Drugs

- Potential vaccine side effects can include headache, fever, chills, fatigue, body aches, and soreness from the injection. Since side effects from the vaccine may be similar to withdrawal

symptoms from some substances, knowing this may help individuals differentiate between experiencing withdrawal or expected side effects from the vaccine.

- Due to potential vaccine side effects, individuals may feel unwell for a few days after receiving the first and/or second vaccine dose. People may want to consider this into plans for substance use during the days following vaccine administration.
- If possible, plan for a safe space to rest after vaccine administration, as well as for up to a few days after each dose.
- Ice packs or heating pads on the administration site may help relieve pain and soreness from the injection. Over-the-counter pain medication may help with potential side effects.

### Resources

[COVID-19 Vaccination](#)

[Frequently Asked Questions about COVID-19 Vaccination](#)

[COVID-19 Questions and Answers: For People Who Use Drugs or Have Substance Use Disorder](#)

[Underlying Medical Conditions Associated with High Risk for Severe COVID-19](#)

[Project Finish Line COVID-19 Vaccine Toolkit](#)

[Ad Council Vaccine Community Education Toolkit](#)

[A Sex Worker's Guide for Getting Vaccinated Against COVID](#)

[COVID-19 Vaccines and People with HIV Frequently Asked Questions](#)

[V-safe After Vaccination Health Checker](#)

[COVID-19 Vaccines and the Harm Reduction Community](#)

[COVID-19 Vaccination for People Experiencing Homelessness: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

[Interim Guidance for Health Departments: COVID-19 Vaccination Implementation for People Experiencing Homelessness](#)