

I just took COVID-19 vaccine dose No. 2,873. But will it work?

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

I might have been vaccinated for the coronavirus last Wednesday morning.

I'm equally likely to have received a 5cc shot that was mostly saline, however.

As a participant in a [vaccine trial](#) being conducted by Washington University in St. Louis, I'm not yet sure when I will find out which.

In the meantime, researchers will monitor participants for [side effects](#) through in-person visits and an app, and watch to see who catches coronavirus from exposures in the community.

They will not intentionally expose anyone to the virus as part of the study.

Most side effects show up in the first two days. I was cheering for some, hoping that would mean I got the real vaccine. My arm was slightly sore. That's it.

And before you wonder, I already asked—a sore arm doesn't signal whether I received the placebo or the vaccine. Even the researchers don't know if I got the real stuff.

Motivations

This is not my first time being a test subject. I tested a bird flu vaccine in 2014 and failed the screening for a Zika vaccine in 2016, both through St. Louis University's Vaccine Center.

Back then, my primary motivation was the hundreds of dollars that they pay participants. Part of it was also the opportunity to have early access to vaccines. Another part was in response to a notion I sometimes subscribe to, that our bodies need to be challenged by unfamiliar pathogens more often than they are, and that such challenges make us stronger. I've traveled to dozens of countries around the world, and

gotten really, really sick in several. To go to those places, I was often advised to get vaccinated against various diseases rarely seen in the U.S., such as cholera and yellow fever.

Researchers at Washington University told me most people in the study say they want to get a COVID-19 vaccine without having to wait until next year.

That's part of it for me, but an equal or more important reason is to lessen the likelihood that I will bring the coronavirus home to my wife and children.

I cover [federal courts](#) and federal law enforcement for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. I've had the luxury of being able to listen to many court hearings remotely, and to cover many other news stories by phone.

But I have also written plenty of stories that put me in the community. I've covered protests, marches and news conferences. I've interviewed people who don't want to wear a mask, and I've stood next to reporters who felt the same.

I'm no first responder, and others at the Post-Dispatch are often out in public more, but my job does carry an increased risk to my family.

Amanda St. Amand, digital editor at the Post-Dispatch, is also in the Janssen study. She said that getting quicker access to the vaccine "never even crossed my mind."

"This is a horrible illness. I believe in science. We need to do whatever we can to help," she said.

Her children, one of whom is a nurse in Colorado, were supportive. Her husband was wary of the possible side effects.

Her arm was also slightly sore.

Rush to a vaccine

I volunteered for coronavirus vaccine trials at both St. Louis University and Washington University, as did St. Amand.

Washington University called me first about a vaccine made by AstraZeneca. We scheduled an appointment for early September, days before it was halted to study possible serious side effects. The Food and Drug Administration late last month authorized resumption of trials. But Washington University had moved on to a new vaccine—Janssen Pharmaceuticals' JNJ-78436735 or Ad26.COV2.S.

The study is known by the more user-friendly name, ENSEMBLE.

To my knowledge, I received no special consideration as a reporter. I did not discuss with staff that I wanted to write about the trial until the morning I received the dose.

At the initial appointment Wednesday, Washington University checked various vital signs, took blood samples, and I swabbed my own nose. They wanted to know whether I had already been exposed.

I'm in good health. And I've tested negative twice before; once this summer when I had some more uncommon symptoms of the disease, and most recently when I donated blood through the Red Cross.

They told me that I received the 2,873rd dose during this phase-three trial, which largely tests for efficacy. Earlier phases tested the safety of the vaccine candidate and determined if it triggered an immune response at all.

They inject either saline, or 50 billion [virus particles](#).

Janssen was the fourth large-scale vaccine trial to begin in the U.S. The company uses an inactivated common cold virus modified to carry just a part of the SARS-CoV-2 virus—the spike protein that has become ubiquitous in images of the novel coronavirus—to try to trigger an immune response. Janssen uses the same modified cold virus in its Ebola vaccine regimen.

Here's how this study will work: Because researchers won't intentionally expose participants to the coronavirus, the study instead has to use statistics to test the vaccine's effectiveness. Researchers expect that a certain number of people in the trial would normally, as a part of their daily lives, contract the virus from the community. The study will then compare the number of participants who caught the virus with what researchers could statistically expect.

I know some Americans are skeptical of vaccines, don't trust the government and the media, and believe conspiracy theories. As a reporter, I hear from them with some frequency. A woman emailed me earlier this year, for example, repeating claims that she found online—that masks cause [coronavirus](#) and that pharmaceutical companies are lying about the virus to try to profit off a vaccine.

There's a small part of me that hopes my experience can help skeptics like her.

Still, personally, it's hard not knowing whether I've been vaccinated, and how effective that [vaccine](#) might be.

I can't change my behavior based on this trial and its 50/50 chance. But it might lower my stress level just a little.

And it does feel good to be able to help, in some small way.

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