

What you should know about COVID-19 booster shots and third vaccine doses

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Increasingly, research shows many people who have weakened immune systems haven't been able to receive full protection from their COVID-19 vaccines. Unlike healthy people who've been vaccinated

against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, immunocompromised people's bodies may not produce enough protective antibodies after two doses of the COVID-19 vaccines. This could leave them particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, especially as more contagious variants circulate in a community.

That's why [federal health authorities announced in mid-August](#) that they would allow immunocompromised people to get special, additional doses of the Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines. This week, U.S. officials also announced that they will [prepare to offer booster shots starting the week of Sept. 20](#). The boosters will be available to individuals eight months after the completion of their second dose.

In the following Q&A, Assoc. Prof. Emily Landon explains how the booster dose differs from the previously announced third dose, and more information you should know about both. An [infectious diseases](#) specialist and hospital epidemiologist, Landon is the executive medical director for infection prevention and control at UChicago Medicine and is one of Chicago's preeminent experts on the coronavirus.

Am I eligible for a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine?

In the United States, only people with weakened immune systems are eligible for a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) says these doses for now should go to only those who are immunocompromised and who received the mRNA vaccines made by Pfizer or Moderna.

While that may change, this group currently includes patients who've had or are receiving:

- Organ transplants
- Stem cell transplants within the past two years
- Active cancer treatment for tumors or blood cancer and are undergoing chemotherapy that affects the [immune system](#)
- Severe primary immunodeficiency
- Advanced or untreated HIV
- Active treatment with high-dose corticosteroids or other drugs that may suppress your immune response.

There is not enough data yet to know whether immunocompromised people who got the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine need another dose, but we expect to know more soon.

You are not eligible for a third dose of the vaccine at this time if you are healthy, do not have one of these specific conditions, or do not take certain immunosuppressive medications.

Is a third dose the same thing as a booster dose?

No. A booster is given to people who got a full course of a vaccine and developed a good response. For some vaccines, antibodies and other aspects of a person's initially strong immune response start to decrease (or wane) over time. When that happens, people are offered booster doses to pump their immune response back to previous levels.

Unlike boosters, third/additional doses of COVID-19 vaccines are for people who received the complete starter series of vaccines but then their immune systems didn't have a good enough response. Evidence shows these are generally people whose immune systems are weaker. That's why the FDA and CDC are recommending an additional dose for immunocompromised individuals.

Scientists are watching COVID-19 vaccine recipients closely to see if

there is evidence of waning immunity, and some countries have even begun offering booster doses to older people or those who were vaccinated in early phases of vaccine clinical trials. In the U.S., federal health officials say they expect boosters to begin the week of Sept. 20 for those who completed their second doses at least eight months prior. Those likely to be eligible first are individuals who were vaccinated earliest, including nursing home residents and health care workers.

Does my booster vaccine need to be the same brand as my initial vaccine?

If possible, yes. The CDC recommends that booster doses match the original mRNA vaccines people received earlier this year. This subsequent dose should be given at least 28 days after the second dose of the vaccine. If you absolutely cannot find a matching dose of vaccine, it would be OK to get the other one.

If I am immunocompromised, will I be fully protected after I get my third dose of the vaccine?

No. If you are immunocompromised, a third dose is supposed to provide you with better protection from COVID-19, but it may not provide you with the same level of immunity as healthy people. In studies, most participants who had any immune response to the first two doses did better after a third dose, but some people didn't. If you're immunocompromised, that means you should still take extra precautions to avoid getting COVID-19, such as wearing a mask (especially inside) and avoiding large crowds or high-risk activities. Consider wearing eye protection (like a face shield), particularly if you're around unmasked people who may be unvaccinated.

Discuss your ongoing risk with your healthcare provider and ask them

how you should reduce your risk. It's important that your family members and regular close contacts get vaccinated, too. This decreases the likelihood that you will be exposed to COVID-19.

I have a health condition that isn't on the CDC's third-dose list. Can I still get my COVID-19 booster shot?

If your health condition is not on the CDC's third-dose list, then you are not yet eligible for an additional shot. If you aren't sure whether your condition counts, contact your doctor. Hospitals, doctors' offices and pharmacies can give third doses only to people who federal public health authorities have said should receive the additional doses. Other people do not need to receive booster shots at this time.

Why didn't we know booster doses would be needed before?

We're still learning about the COVID-19 vaccines and how well—and for how long—they protect us from the virus and its emerging variants. The CDC's decision to provide third doses to immunocompromised people was made after data showed these groups were particularly vulnerable to infections since they had little protection from their earlier immunizations. We will keep learning about these vaccines in the coming months and years, which means we will adjust our vaccine plan accordingly.

Will more people eventually need additional doses of the COVID-19 vaccines?

It's almost certain that most people will eventually need to get [booster](#) shots or additional doses of the vaccines. However, we are still studying

how long the vaccines will protect people. The good news is that people who are healthy should still have ample protection from their COVID-19 vaccines. While some healthy, vaccinated people do get COVID-19 infections, they are much less common than in unvaccinated people and they are much less severe. This is why it's important for people who haven't received their [vaccine](#) yet to get it right away.

Provided by University of Chicago

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