



INFORMATION SHEET ON THE COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisation Programme

Vaccination against the COVID-19 virus is regarded as a critical step in overcoming the coronavirus pandemic. **New Zealand has now begun rolling out its public vaccination programme using the two-dose Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.** The NZ Catholic bishops are strongly urging everyone in Aotearoa New Zealand to get a COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available.

Unfortunately, there has been false information circulating about the safety, efficacy and moral acceptability of COVID-19 vaccines. This resource seeks to provide accurate information based on the Catholic moral tradition and up-to-date science.

Key points

1. The current, lethal dangers posed by COVID-19 make vaccination a vital part of the strategy for living with the virus. Getting vaccinated protects others as well as ourselves. While it is not mandatory, it is an act of solidarity that upholds our duty to the common good of society, including those who are most vulnerable to the virus.
2. Being vaccinated against COVID-19 does not imply moral endorsement of the vaccine production process or complicity with abortion.
3. There have not been any compromises made in testing the safety and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines, despite the shortened development time. The vaccine offered in New Zealand has been subject to rigorous standards of testing and has been approved by Medsafe, the NZ Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Authority.

“I believe that morally, everyone must take the vaccine. It is the moral choice because it is about your life [and] the lives of others.”

– POPE FRANCIS (10 JANUARY 2021)

Who can get a vaccine?

The Ministry of Health website notes that “everyone in New Zealand is eligible for a free COVID-19 vaccination, regardless of visa or citizenship status. Any information collected will not be used for immigration purposes.”

Some people are more at risk of catching COVID-19 (for example border workers and their families) and others (people with certain pre-existing health conditions) are more vulnerable to the consequences of having COVID-19. These groups will be given priority access to vaccinations.

It usually takes years to produce new vaccines. Has safety been compromised?

No, safety has not been compromised. The approved COVID-19 vaccine has undergone the normal safety trials. The process has been accelerated by governments and companies sharing the financial risk of developing the vaccine and a level of global collaboration between researchers that has never happened previously. In some countries, including New Zealand, the medicines regulators have allowed the vaccine manufacturer to submit its data on a rolling basis rather than in fixed stages, which has also sped up the approval process.

What about adverse effects?

As with all medicines, vaccines are not completely risk-free. The **Pfizer/BioNTech** vaccine has a safety record comparable with other (non-COVID-19) vaccines in use. The data collected to date shows that most adverse reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine are ‘minor’ – similar to what some people experience when taking the flu vaccine. While the possibility of developing a more serious reaction exists, the risk of developing a serious and even fatal illness from COVID-19 is many times greater than the risk of developing a rare disorder after vaccination. Anyone with concerns about being vaccinated should discuss them with their healthcare practitioner.

What about people with allergies or underlying health conditions?

Taking a vaccine always involves a risk-benefit decision. Not everyone can be vaccinated. For now, the vaccine will not be given to children under 16 years of

age. Those with compromised immune systems or severe allergies need to have a benefit-risk conversation with their healthcare practitioner.

What is herd immunity and how does it work?

People who, for health reasons, cannot be vaccinated, will still experience a significant degree of protection if they live in communities where the majority have been vaccinated – the people who have been vaccinated form a protective shield around them. This is called herd immunity. For this shield to be effective, a high percentage of the community needs to be vaccinated.

Is there a moral duty to be vaccinated?

Vaccination for COVID-19 will not be mandatory in New Zealand. However, as noted by the Vatican COVID-19 Commission, refusal of the vaccine may constitute a risk to others. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has stated in its recent document on COVID-19 vaccines that, “from the ethical point of view, **the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one’s own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good ... especially to protect the weakest and most exposed.**”

See: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html

Is there a risk that some of the vaccines will manipulate human DNA?

No, this is not scientifically correct. The mRNA in the **Pfizer/BioNTech** vaccine does not affect human DNA for two reasons; because mRNA cannot enter the nucleus of our cells, the place where our DNA is housed, and because mRNA cannot integrate with or alter human DNA anyway.

What links are there between COVID-19 vaccines and abortion?

The production of certain vaccines requires the use of continuously replicating cell lines, developed in laboratories, to grow the vaccine. While some use animal cell lines, others use human cell lines, started 40 or 50 years ago, with tissue sourced from an aborted fetus. These cell lines are accurately described as having a “very distant” historical link to abortion.

While some of the tests used to confirm the quality of the **Pfizer/BioNTech messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine** involve a human cell line with a very distant historical link to abortion, **the production of this vaccine does not require the use of human cell lines.**

Catholic teaching opposes abortion under all circumstances. However, in a note on vaccines published in 2017, the Pontifical Academy for Life has stated that “the wrong in the moral sense lies in the actions [of those involved in the original abortion] not in the vaccines or the material itself.” This means that the use of such vaccines does not, in itself, signify any sort of cooperation with voluntary abortion.

In late December 2020 the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated that the “grave danger” of spreading COVID-19 outweighs moral concerns related to abortion. The Congregation concludes “all [COVID-19] vaccinations recognised as clinically safe and effective can be used in good conscience.”

See: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html

“We reject the false information circulating on the internet and elsewhere that claims vaccines should not be used. Vaccines work, and they protect against a wide range of illnesses.”

– CARDINAL JOHN DEW

Resources

The New Zealand Ministry of Health: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-vaccines/covid-19-getting-vaccine>

The (New Zealand) Immunisation Advisory Centre: <https://www.immune.org.nz/covid-19-vaccination-general-info-faq>

The New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference: <https://www.catholic.org.nz/news/media-releases/bishops-support-covid-vaccine/>

The New England Journal of Medicine – COVID-19 Vaccine Frequently Asked Questions: https://www.nejm.org/covid-vaccine/faq?cid=DM108098_&bid=353262679