

Coronavirus and Cancer

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are common in people and many different species of animals. Four common coronaviruses cause the common cold; several other coronaviruses cause more serious disease. One of these is a novel (new) coronavirus that spreads from person to person and has caused a pandemic of respiratory disease. The virus has been named SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes has been named [coronavirus disease 2019, which is abbreviated COVID-19](#). (CDC Covid page)

The predominant strain of the virus in the United States is now the [Delta variant](#). The Delta variant is more than twice as contagious as earlier strains of the virus. Scientists are still trying to determine if this variant causes more severe disease or affects the body differently than other strains.

If I have cancer or had it in the past, am I at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19?

If you have cancer, you have a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Other factors that increase the risk for severe illness from COVID-19 include:

- having a weakened immune system (being immunocompromised)
- older age
- other medical conditions

People with blood cancers may be at higher risk of prolonged infection and death from COVID-19 than people with solid tumors. That is because patients with blood cancers often have abnormal or depleted levels of immune cells that produce [antibodies](#) against viruses.

NCI is conducting a [large study of people with cancer who have COVID-19](#) to learn more about the risk factors for COVID-19 and to help doctors better manage treatment for people with cancer and COVID-19. Having a history of cancer may increase your risk of severe illness from COVID-19. People who have been treated for cancer in the past may want to discuss their concerns about COVID-19 with their doctors.

If I have cancer now or had it in the past, should I get a COVID-19 vaccine?

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention recommends that everyone 12 years and older get a COVID-19 vaccine. (The vaccine for 5-12 year old children was approved after this article was written.) That includes most people with underlying medical conditions, including cancer.

If you recently received cancer treatment that suppresses the immune system—such as chemotherapy, a stem cell or bone marrow transplant, or cell therapy—your doctor may suggest that you wait until your immune system has recovered before you get vaccinated. Or your doctor may suggest that you wait a few weeks after vaccination to get immunosuppressive treatment.

To help protect people with cancer from COVID-19, it is important that their family members, loved ones, and caregivers get vaccinated. The COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective at preventing severe disease and death, including from the Delta variant. In areas where the virus is spreading quickly, wearing a mask in public indoor spaces and social distancing will also help protect vulnerable people and prevent the spread of the virus.

COVID-19 Vaccine and Breast Cancer Screening

A COVID-19 vaccine shot may cause temporary swelling of the lymph nodes in the armpit, recent studies have found. Because this side effect of the vaccine may be mistaken for a sign of breast cancer, several oncology groups are recommending that people wait 4–6 weeks after completing COVID-19 vaccination before getting a mammogram.

Should I get a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine?

People with certain cancers or who are receiving treatment that suppresses the immune system [may have a weaker response to COVID-19 vaccines](#) than people whose immune systems are not compromised.

CDC recommends that people whose immune systems are moderately to severely compromised and who received two doses of an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna) receive a third dose of the same vaccine. According to CDC, such people include those who:

- are being treated for blood cancer (leukemia, lymphoma, or multiple myeloma)
- have received a stem cell transplant within the past 2 years
- are taking medicine that may suppress your immune response

At this time, there is not enough data to recommend an additional dose for people who received Johnson & Johnson's Janssen vaccine.

Visit CDC's website for [more information about COVID-19 vaccines for immunocompromised people](#), and ask your doctor if you should get an additional dose.

What are other ways that I can protect myself?

Aside from vaccination, the most effective way to prevent COVID-19 is to avoid being exposed to the virus that causes it. [People at high risk for developing serious illness from COVID-19](#) can help protect themselves by limiting their interactions with other people as much as possible and by [taking precautions to prevent getting COVID-19](#) when they do interact with others.

To protect yourself and prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- Get a COVID-19 vaccination.
- Wear a well-fitting mask that covers your nose and mouth.
- Stay 6 feet away from people who don't live with you.
- Avoid crowds and poorly ventilated indoor spaces.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. Use hand sanitizer if soap and water aren't available.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily.
- Be alert for symptoms of COVID-19.

What should I do if I have symptoms of an infection?

If you think you have been exposed to COVID-19 or have [symptoms of an infection](#), isolate yourself from others and call your health care provider. You may need to get tested for coronavirus.

This is a stressful time. How do I cope?

Coping with cancer in the face of the coronavirus can bring up a wide range of feelings you're not used to dealing with. Learn more about feelings you may have and [ways to cope with them](#).

What if I have additional questions?

You can call NCI's [Cancer Information Service \(CIS\)](#) can help answer questions that you or a loved one may have about COVID-19 or your cancer care. To reach the CIS:

- Call 1-800-4-CANCER ([1-800-422-6237](tel:1-800-422-6237)) Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. ET in English or Spanish. After business hours, recorded information is available.
- Online [LiveHelp®](#) chat offers online assistance in English and Spanish Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. ET.

Resources

- Learn more about [what people with cancer should know about COVID-19 vaccines](#). (NCI)
- To find a COVID-19 vaccine near you, visit [Vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov).
- [Coronavirus Vaccines and People with Cancer : A Q&A with Dr. Steven Pergam](#) (Feb 10, 2021)
An expert explains why it's important for people with cancer to get vaccinated. (NCI)
- [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) - CDC](#) (Centers for Disease Control)
- [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) - NIH](#) (National Institutes of Health)
- [Coping with Stress - CDC](#)
- [Smoking and COVID-19](#) (Smokefree.gov)

Source: National Cancer Institute Website: www.cancer.gov

Updated: August 18, 2021