

COVID-19 VACCINES EXPLAINED: THIRD VACCINE DOSE VS. BOOSTER SHOT

(Last updated on October 5, 2021)

What is the difference between a third dose and a booster shot?

For certain immunocompromised people, 28 days after they received their second shot of an mRNA vaccine (i.e. Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna), an additional third dose is intended to improve the immune response to their initial vaccine series. In contrast, a “booster shot” refers to another dose of a vaccine that is given to someone who has already built up enough protection after vaccination but whose protection may have decreased over time (referred to as “waning immunity”).

Who is eligible to receive an additional vaccine dose or booster shot?

Whether and when you can get a third COVID-19 vaccine shot depends on if you have a compromised immune system and what COVID-19 vaccine you previously received.

Third Doses

For those with a moderately to severely compromised immune system, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends receiving an additional third dose of an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine at least 28 days after receiving the second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine. Although the CDC recommends people talk with their health care provider about their medical condition to determine whether getting an additional dose is appropriate for them, this population generally includes people who have:

- Been receiving active cancer treatment for tumors or cancers of the blood
- Received an organ transplant and are taking medicine to suppress the immune system
- Received a stem cell transplant within the last 2 years or are taking medicine to suppress the immune system
- Moderate or severe primary immunodeficiency (such as DiGeorge syndrome and Wiskott-Aldrich syndrome)
- Advanced or untreated HIV infection
- Active treatment with high-dose corticosteroids or other drugs that may suppress immune responses

Booster Shots

For others who received both doses of Pfizer-BioNTech’s COVID-19 vaccine but are not considered immunocompromised, the CDC has recommended a booster shot for

certain populations, largely based on age, and for those in high risk occupational and institutional settings. Per the CDC's guidance:

- People 65 years and older and residents in long-term care settings *should* receive a booster shot of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine at least 6 months after their primary series,
- People aged 50–64 years with [underlying medical conditions](#) *should* receive a booster shot of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine at least 6 months after their primary series,
- People aged 18–49 years with [underlying medical conditions](#) *may* receive a booster shot of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine at least 6 months after their primary series, based on their individual benefits and risks, and
- People aged 18-64 years who are at increased risk for COVID-19 exposure and transmission because of occupational or institutional setting *may* receive a booster shot, based on their individual benefits and risks.

Why get an additional dose or booster shot?

People with moderately to severely compromised immune systems are especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Studies indicate that some immunocompromised people don't always build the same level of immunity after vaccination the way non-immunocompromised people do and may benefit from an additional dose to ensure adequate protection against COVID-19.

For others, the COVID-19 vaccines are working very well to prevent severe illness, hospitalization and death, even against the highly transmissible Delta variant. However, public health experts are starting to see early signs of reduced protection against mild and moderate disease due in part because of the COVID-19 variants. For that reason, the federal government is working with state and local health departments to increase supplies of COVID-19 vaccines and prepare for expanded access to booster shots if they are determined by public health experts and through various clinical studies to be medically necessary for maintaining protection for a longer period.

Will non-immunocompromised people who received the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson's (Janssen) COVID-19 vaccine need a booster shot?

It has not been determined whether a booster is necessary for those who received a Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Because the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines were available in the United States at later dates than the first mRNA vaccine doses (Pfizer-BioNTech), the data needed to make this decision is not available yet, but a decision is expected in the coming weeks.

Where do you get an additional third dose?

Any vaccine provider should be able to provide third doses for immunocompromised individuals and offer booster shots to individuals who meet Food and Drug Administration and CDC's requirements. When making an appointment, individuals will be asked to provide the dates of their previous COVID-19 vaccinations (available on vaccination cards). Visit vaccines.gov or <https://hawaiiicovid19.com/vaccine/> to find a vaccination site near you.