Ask POZ – March 2021

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February 15, 2021 By Liz Highleyman

Who Can Safely Receive COVID-19 Vaccines?

In December 2020, the Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use authorization to two COVID-19 vaccines—one from Pfizer and BioNTech, the other from Moderna and the National Institutes of Health.

Most people can safely receive the vaccines. Although in clinical trials, many people experienced side effects, such as injection site reactions, fatigue and headache—especially after the second dose—these were usually mild to moderate and lasted only a couple of days.

A small number of people who have received the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine experienced severe allergic reactions. But these rare reactions should not derail the rollout of the vaccines, experts say. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that a clinician with access to emergency supplies should be available to manage anaphylactic reactions. People with a history of allergic reactions should be observed for 30 minutes post-vaccination; others should be observed for 15 minutes.

Outcomes have not yet been analyzed separately for the HIV-positive participants in the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna trials. Experts encourage people living with HIV to get vaccinated and say there's no reason to think the vaccines won't be safe.

Vaccine safety and effectiveness also have not yet been determined for people with cancer or other health conditions. The vaccines are not contraindicated for such individuals—and experts do not foresee problems—but they should talk to their care providers about their specific situations.

People with more advanced immune suppression may not respond as well to the new vaccines; this requires further study. Unlike vaccines that contain live virus, these two mRNA vaccines pose

no known risk and potentially offer benefit.

The vaccines have not yet been studied in children or adolescents. The Pfizer/BioNTech trial did include a small number of 16- and 17-year-olds, and no safety concerns were reported. This vaccine is authorized for people ages 16 and up, and the Moderna vaccine is indicated for those 18 and older. Trials for teens and younger children are now getting underway or will start soon.

The vaccines also have not yet been studied in pregnant people. But again, experts say individuals in this group should not be excluded from vaccination if they are otherwise eligible.

Finally, people who have had the new coronavirus—many of whom are unaware of it because they were asymptomatic or weren't tested—can safely receive the vaccines, and vaccination may offer additional protection beyond natural immunity.

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