



What to Know About Vaccines When You Have Cancer

Vaccines can help protect against contagious germs that cause illnesses like the flu, COVID-19, shingles, and pneumonia. If you have cancer or have received certain cancer treatments, your cancer care team can help determine which vaccines may be right for you. This fact sheet answers some common questions you may have about vaccines.

How do vaccines help people with cancer?

Cancer and some of its treatments – like chemotherapy or radiation – can weaken a person’s immune system. When this happens, a person has a higher risk of getting an infection because their immune response is not strong enough to fight it off. They are also more likely to get very sick if they do get an infection. Vaccines can help people with cancer by protecting them from some serious illnesses.

How do vaccines work?

A vaccine helps your immune system recognize and fight off a specific germ, such as a virus or bacteria, without causing illness. The vaccine works by exposing your body to a form of the germ. This helps your immune system learn how to protect you from the real germ. The vaccine helps build immunity against the germ, making you less likely to get sick from it if you are exposed later in life.



Visit cancer.org/vaccines to learn more about vaccines for people with cancer.

Should people with cancer get vaccines?

It's important for people with weakened immune systems to get certain vaccines. But, not all vaccines are recommended for everyone with cancer. Ask your cancer care team which vaccines may be recommended for you. They can help guide your decision based mainly on how strong your immune system is at the time. Other factors that affect which vaccines they may recommend include:

- Your type of cancer
- Your cancer treatment plan
- The type of vaccine and your risk of getting that specific illness
- Other health problems you may have

Why might some vaccines not be recommended for people with cancer?

Some vaccines are made with a weakened live virus, and others are made with a dead form of the virus. Cancer and its treatment can change how your body protects you and how it reacts to certain vaccines.

- A vaccine made with a weak form of a live virus is called an attenuated virus.
 - If your immune system is healthy, these vaccines can teach your body to fight off the virus. But if your immune system is not strong, even the weaker form of a live virus could make you sick.
- A vaccine made with a dead virus is called an inactivated virus.
 - The virus has been killed so it can't infect you or make you sick, even if your immune system is weakened. But it can still teach your body to protect against and fight off the virus later.

Should caregivers and family members get vaccinated?

Even a mild infection in a healthy person can be serious for someone with cancer. People who have had recommended vaccines are less likely to spread illness to a person with a weakened immune system. People who live with or care for a person who has a weakened immune system should talk with their health care team about which vaccines may be recommended for their situation.

It's important to talk with your cancer care team about your risk of infection. They will guide you on which vaccines may be recommended and which ones are not.



Questions to Ask Your Cancer Care Team

- Will my cancer or cancer treatment weaken my immune system?
- Are there any vaccines you recommend for me and when should I get them?
- Are there any vaccines I should not get and why?
- Do you recommend any vaccines for my caregiver or other close contacts?