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COVID-19 Vaccines factsheet - January 2021

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The BHG consists of Dr Donald Palmer Associate Professor of Immunology, Dr Jacqueline McLeod GP and Terence Channer LLB Healthcare Solicitor. The BHG was formed to address issues and concerns in relation to COVID19 vaccination in the black community.

Currently three vaccines have been approved for emergency use in the UK - Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna and Oxford/AstraZeneca. The vaccination programme has been underway since mid-December 2020 and at the time of writing, over 7 million people have been vaccinated (you can get daily updates here)

The aim of this short factsheet is to address some questions that you may have.

1. Will the vaccines work?

All three vaccines in use in the UK are more than 90% effective in preventing an individual from getting symptoms of the disease after they have received both a first and second dose as recommended. We do not as yet have robust evidence on whether the vaccines stop transmission of the virus between individuals.

2. Are the vaccines safe?

While it normally takes years or even decades for an effective vaccine to be produced, international resources have been mobilised in order to find a vaccine against COVID-19 within a very rapid time-frame. Using the same safety protocols, clinical trials have been followed for these vaccines that all other licensed medicines go through. The vaccines approved for use in the UK have met strict standards of safety, quality and effectiveness set out by the independent Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). So far, millions of people have been given a COVID-19 vaccine and reports of serious side effects, such as allergic reactions, have been very rare. **No long-term complications have been reported.**

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3. Haven't some doctors and scientists said that the vaccines are unsafe or that they will be used for social engineering purposes?

There are more than 20 million doctors and relevant research scientists in the world at present. An extremely small fraction of them have contributed to various conspiracy theories or pseudo-scientific claims. Within any large group of people, there will always be a few at the margins who hold unconventional views. **The overwhelming consensus of medical and scientific consensus is that these vaccines are safe, necessary and ethical**.

4. Will the vaccines offer immediate immunity?

The first generation of vaccines are dual dose with a period of time (currently 12 weeks) between the two injections. It takes a few weeks for your body to build immunity after the first injection, the second injection is required to boost the immune system and provide longer lasting protection. However, the vaccine will not result in immunity for everyone who receives it so it is important to still wear a facemask, wash hands regularly or sanitise and keep your 2 metre distance from others.

5. How do the vaccines work?

Different technologies lie behind various vaccines, but they all work to stimulate an individual's own immune system to recognise and counteract the coronavirus (COVID-19). **None of the vaccines alters human DNA in any way.**

6. Should pregnant women be vaccinated?

There is no evidence that the COVID-19 vaccine is unsafe in pregnancy, so if you are pregnant, discuss the benefits and risks of the COVID-19 vaccination with your healthcare professionals. The Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisation (JCVI) now recommend that the vaccine may be advisable if you are pregnant and:

- at high risk of getting coronavirus because of where you work
- have a health condition that means you're at high risk of serious complications of coronavirus

7. Should women be vaccinated if they are breastfeeding?

You can have the COVID-19 vaccine if you're breastfeeding. The vaccine cannot give you or your baby COVID-19.

8. Some vaccines are unsuitable for people with allergies to egg products; are these vaccines among them?

None of the COVID-19 vaccines use eggs or any other animal products (e.g. pork gelatine) in their production processes. The government has listed substances contained in the vaccines so that potential allergies can be identified. Full information on the ingredients of the vaccines can be found here: Oxford-Astrazeneca, Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

9. Are these vaccines suitable for people with compromised immune systems?

These particular vaccines do not utilise live viral material and are **safe to use** for those with compromised immune systems.

10. Have the vaccines used aborted foetal material in their development?

None of the COVID-19 vaccines contain any aborted foetal cells. In the 1960s, **cell lines** were developed from aborted foetal material to support the research processes used in almost all vaccine development. It is these cell lines, grown in a laboratory, multiplied thousands of times, not foetal tissue, that were used to ensure the vaccine worked.

11. Should those at low-risk of developing serious complications from COVID-19 be vaccinated?

Priority for these vaccines will be given to those at greatest risk and only once these groups have been offered vaccination is it likely those in low risk groups will be approached. While younger people with no underlying health conditions are at low risk of dying from COVID-19 or developing serious complications in the acute phase of the illness, they can still develop longer-term problems (long COVID). The risk of any potential long-term side-effects of the vaccine are likely to be very much less than risks associated with the virus.

12. Should vaccine/immunity passports be given to those who have been vaccinated?

We do not know if the vaccines will block the virus or limit its effects on individuals. If its effect is to limit the virus it is possible that vaccinated individuals could be asymptomatic carriers of the virus and risk passing it on to others. We also don't know how long an individual's immunity will last. There remains some uncertainty surrounding the introduction of vaccine passports/certificates, but a picture is beginning to emerge:-

- Pimlico Plumbers have recently announced that vaccination will be compulsory for their staff
- Unilever has announced that it will "encourage" all of its employees to take up the vaccine
- Qantas has indicated that it may require vaccinations for flying
- The World Health Organisation is against vaccine passports as a condition of travel 'for the time being'

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13. Will we able to stop wearing face coverings, maintaining social distancing etc?

Although the mass vaccination programme is a significant step forward in the fight against COVID-19, there are still some things we do not yet have answers for. Although vaccines do provide a level of protection against the virus, it is not yet known whether it prevents a vaccinated person from carrying the virus and passing it on to people who have not been vaccinated. In addition, it might be necessary to have further vaccinations depending on how the virus mutates. Therefore, for the foreseeable future, it will still be vital to wear a face-covering, wash hands regularly or sanitize and maintain your social distance

14. Where can we get further help if we are unsure about Covid-19 vaccination?

For further trusted information and advice click here. If you need to discuss Covid-19 vaccination with someone, the best person to speak to is one of your trusted healthcare professionals such as your GP, nurse practitioner, pharmacist or treating consultant who should be able to help you make an informed decision.