



BUSINESS FOR SA | COVID-19

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FAQs: Teenagers and Vaccination



Q. My teenager is in the lowest risk group for Covid-19 – why do they need a vaccination?

A. Of course, we know that older adults are at a much higher risk of dying – which is why we need to urgently get as many people aged 50 and older vaccinated. But that doesn't mean that teenagers aren't at risk. They can still die from Covid-19. Remember too, that vaccination reduces the risk of severe Covid-19, hospitalisation, and the need to go to ICU and be put on oxygen.

Teenagers are also at risk of multisystem inflammatory syndrome (a severe form of Covid-19) as well as long Covid-19 – in which even young and healthy young people who've had mild or even asymptomatic Covid-19 go on to experience long-term symptoms such as fatigue, brain fog, chronic lung disease and persistent loss of smell or taste. In some children and teens who have had Covid-19, it has triggered auto-immune diseases such as juvenile arthritis.

The vaccine can prevent all of the above, and it can also help to improve symptoms in children and teens who have long Covid-19.

Q. I'm still not convinced. The risks for older people seem much higher.

A. They are – and if your teenager is vaccinated, they are less likely to transmit Covid-19 to those older people, such as their parents, teachers and other older family members and friends. If you're vaccinated, you're less likely to be infected with Covid-19, and less likely to transmit the virus – so you protect yourself and everyone around you.

Remember, no vaccine is 100% effective, so even if an older person is vaccinated and they're exposed to an unvaccinated teenager who has Covid-19, they could experience a breakthrough infection. The bottom line is that the more people we can vaccinate, the better for all of us.

Teenagers are also more likely to have a harder time staying in isolation, and might lower their guard when out with friends. And even if your teenager is a homebody, they could be exposed to teenagers who are engaging in risky behaviour while they're all at school together. It just makes more sense to ensure they have the best possible protection.

Q. But what about the risks the vaccination may pose to my teenager's heart?

A. There has been a lot of coverage in the media about myocarditis as a possible risk of the vaccine in younger people, and it's understandable that people are concerned.

However, it's important to understand the risks. According to the Comirnaty Pfizer package insert, the risk of myocarditis and pericarditis following vaccination with Pfizer (up to 21 May when 283 cases had been documented following vaccination from 177 million doses of Pfizer) is 1.6 people per million.

More recent studies, including two done in Israel and published in October in the New England Journal of Medicine show that the risk of myocarditis following vaccination is higher than this, (but still low) at one in 50,000 in young males – or 20 per million. The risk of myocarditis and pericarditis from primary Covid-19 infection itself, however, occurs at a rate of up to 450 cases per million in young males – so the risk of myocarditis from the vaccine is significantly lower than from Covid-19.

In addition, in the cases of myocarditis reported, most were mild and resolved completely.

Q. How will I know if my teenager’s heart has been affected by the vaccine?

A. If your teenager is going to develop myocarditis, it will usually occur within the two weeks after vaccination, and more often after the second dose. In the unlikely event that your teenager develops chest pain, shortness of breath or a fast-beating or fluttering heart, take them to see a doctor straight away, so they can be checked out and treated if necessary.

Q. What side-effects can teenagers experience?

A. Teenagers experience similar side-effects to adults, such as pain, redness and swelling at the injection site, fatigue, headache, muscle and joint pain, fever, nausea, dizziness and swollen glands under the arm, and these should resolve within a couple of days.

This means it’s worth thinking about the timing of when they get their vaccines so that they don’t feel under the weather for exams or sporting activities, for example.

Vaccines can also cause an irregular menstrual cycle, and slightly heavier periods, but this only lasts for a month or two.

You can manage symptoms with an age-appropriate dose of paracetamol or ibuprofen.

Q. What about other effects – can it affect growth, puberty or fertility?

A. The short answer is no. There’s no biological reason or proof that a Covid-19 vaccine can interfere with your child’s puberty progression or growth. Puberty hormones also don’t have any effect on the vaccine’s efficacy. And it also won’t have any impact on their fertility. However, it is important to note that Covid-19 can cause erectile dysfunction in some males, so the vaccine can actually prevent this.

Q. Can my teenager exercise after the vaccination?

A. There aren’t any official guidelines, and some countries have advised people under 30 to avoid intense exercise, so it’s probably wise to proceed with caution and avoid any strenuous activity for five to seven days. They can also monitor their heart rate if they do any gentle exercise. Any unusually high heart rate should be treated with a week of rest.

Q. What if I don’t want my child to be vaccinated and they do?

A. Based on the Children’s Act, which allows children aged 12 to 17 to give their own consent for medical treatment, your child does not require your consent to have a Covid-19 vaccine.

Q. Are vaccines fully tested and approved in this age group?

A. The FDA has fully approved the Pfizer vaccine for use in individuals 16 years and over, and for those aged 12 to 15 years under Emergency Use Authorisation, but it is expected to receive full approval soon.

Our own regulator, the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) has also approved the use of the Pfizer jab to include individuals 12 years and older.

But our teens are also not the first to get their vaccines – literally millions of teenagers have been safely jabbed in the US, Europe and the UAE, and paediatric associations around the world have recommended vaccines for the 12- to 17-year-old age group.

Q. If my teen has had Covid-19, do they still need a vaccination?

A. Yes. The natural immunity you get from infection is variable and unpredictable, but the vaccine gives much more reliable, stable immunity. In addition, the vaccine will act as an immunity booster.

If your teenager has contracted Covid-19, they should wait least 30 days after recovering from a mild infection, or 90 days after recovering from a severe infection, before having a vaccine.

*Adapted from a Q&A prepared and shared by Dr Sheri Fanaroff.
Image: Unsplash*