What should I know about COVID-19 vaccines?

How do vaccines work?
Is it developed too fast?
Are there side effects?
Is it safe?
Is it mandatory?
1. COVID-19 vaccines

Why are COVID-19 vaccines important?
The current COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis, with devastating health, social and economic impact. The COVID-19 virus can cause severe disease and death with yet unknown long-term consequences in people of all ages, including otherwise healthy people. Safe and effective vaccines for COVID-19 can protect individuals from becoming ill, especially healthcare professionals and vulnerable populations, such as older people or those with underlying health issues.

-Which COVID-19 vaccines are approved for vaccination of large groups of people?
At the time of writing (19 Mar 2021), three COVID-19 vaccines are approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA): BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna, Astrazeneca and Johnson & Johnson.

• BioNTech/Pfizer (Comirnaty)
This vaccine is called Comirnaty and is developed by BioNTech/Pfizer, and was approved by the EMA on 21 December 2020. It is an mRNA vaccine. It needs to be administered in two doses with at least 21 days in between to provide maximum protection. This vaccine reduces the chance of getting severe COVID-19 by 95%.

• Moderna
This vaccine is developed by Moderna, and was approved by the EMA on 6 January 2021. This is also an mRNA vaccine. It needs to be administered in two doses with at least 28 days in between in order to be effective. This vaccine reduces the chance of getting severe COVID-19 by 94%.

• AstraZeneca (Oxford vaccine)
This vaccine is developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca. It was approved by the EMA on 29 January 2021, and it is a vector vaccine. It needs to be administered in two doses with at least 28 days in between in order to be effective. This vaccine reduces the chance of getting severe COVID-19 by 82%, and has the benefit that it doesn’t require (extremely) cold storage and the price per vaccine is very low (3 USD).

• Johnson & Johnson
This vaccine was developed by Janssen Pharmaceuticals Companies of Johnson & Johnson and approved by the EMA on March 12. It is a viral vector vaccine, that works with an adenovirus, which means that it is an inactivated part of a common cold virus. It requires only one dose, which provides 67% protection against the Covid-19 virus.

How does an mRNA vaccine work?
The BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are both mRNA vaccines. They contain mRNA, which is wrapped in lipid particles. The mRNA is like a recipe that contains instructions for your cells to produce a protein that is specific for the COVID-19 virus, i.e. the spike protein. Once your body cells come in contact with this protein they will react by producing antibodies to the COVID-19 virus. If you later get the actual COVID-19 virus, your body will have these antibodies ready and prevent you from getting sick.
How does a vector vaccine work?
The Oxford/AstraZeneca & Johnson & Johnson vaccines are vector vaccines. These vaccines also work like a recipe, it contains the RNA with instructions to produce the spike protein. This RNA is added to another virus that is modified into a harmless version, which is called the vector vaccine. Your body cells will make antibodies against the spike protein as well as the vector vaccine. If you later get the actual COVID-19 virus, your body will have these antibodies ready and prevent you from getting sick.

Who should get the vaccine?
The approved vaccines are considered safe for persons with age 18 to 95 years, breastfeeding women, persons known with food allergies and persons with underlying conditions such as chronic lung disease, cardiac disease and liver disease.

Who should not get the vaccine?
• It is not advised to administer the BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna vaccine to the following groups until more research is done to ensure the highest standard of safety for these specific groups:
  • Pregnant women
  • Children under 16 years
All vaccines are thoroughly tested on tens of thousands of persons in medical trials before they are approved. However, the above groups were not included in the trials yet. Even though we expect it to be harmless for these groups as well, we will await the results of further research and approval for these specific groups.

The following persons should consult their family doctor in order to decide whether any vaccine is safe for them to take:
• Severe allergic (anaphylactic) reaction to a vaccine or medication in the past. Only a severe allergic reaction against any of the vaccine ingredients is a definite contra-indication.
• Persons with severe coagulation disorders or on coagulation medication, because the injection can cause bruising or bleeding.

The following persons should delay their COVID-19 vaccination:
• Acute severe infection or acute febrile illness at time of the planned vaccination. These persons should delay the vaccination until symptoms have subsided. However, persons with mild infection symptoms do not need to delay.
• Current or recent confirmed COVID-19 infection. Persons who have had a COVID-19 infection are recommended to get a COVID-19 vaccine, but at least 4 weeks after onset of symptoms or positive COVID-19 test result to distinguish between infection symptoms and vaccine side effects.
• Suspected COVID-19 infection. Persons with symptoms possibly related to COVID-19 should not come to the vaccination station. They should get tested and wait for their results first. If the result is negative, you can then still get you vaccine.
• Treated with monoclonal antibodies for COVID-19. These persons should wait at least 3 months before getting the vaccine.
Should immunocompromised persons get the vaccine?
Immunocompromised is not a contra-indication for the COVID-19 vaccine per se, but immunocompromised persons should consult to their general practitioner or specialist first to decide whether to take the vaccine. Hypothetically, the vaccine could be less effective because the immune reaction induced by the vaccine could be weaker than for immuno-competent persons. At this point in time we do not know if and to what extent the vaccine is less effective for immuno-compromised persons. Partial immunity could still be preferred over no immunity in this group with increased risk of getting severely ill from COVID-19. When getting an mRNA vaccine like Pfizer/BioNtech or Moderna, there is no risk of developing a vaccine-derived COVID-19 infection because mRNA vaccines do not contain the virus itself. The potential side effects are similar as for immuno-competent persons. These side effects could outweigh the consequences of the risk of getting severely ill from COVID-19 when not vaccinated.

But if you get infected with the COVID-19 virus itself, your body also makes antibodies, right?
Yes, when you get infected with a virus without being vaccinated, your body will also make antibodies. But it takes time to make antibodies, and during this time you will get sick, spread the virus more easily to others, and if you get very sick you can even die. In addition, the vaccine provides a much better protection, compared to getting infected by the virus itself.

How long is the vaccine effective?
At this point in time, it is not known how long the vaccine will protect you from getting sick from the COVID-19 virus. After a complete vaccination (two doses with the recommended time interval between the doses), you might need another dose after some time in order to ensure that the immunity will last.

How is the vaccine given?
The vaccine is given by an injection in the muscle of the upper arm. Afterwards you’ll be asked to take place in a monitoring room under the surveillance of a physician for 15 minutes, to make sure that medical treatment can be given in the very small chance of a severe reaction to the virus.
What are the side effects?
All vaccines can give side effects. These side effects are a good sign, because it means that your immune response is activated and starts to produce antibodies. However, if you do not experience side effects, that doesn’t mean that the vaccine is not working. The most common side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines are similar to those of other vaccines. They are mostly mild, harmless and subside after 1-3 days. These are the most common side effects:

- Pain, swelling or redness on the site where the vaccine was injected
- Headache
- Tiredness
- Muscle pain
- Fever
- Nausea

A rare side effect that has been observed with all vaccines is a severe allergic (anaphylactic) reaction shortly after administering the vaccine. With proper and prompt medical treatment, an anaphylactic reaction can be solved without permanent damage. For the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine, the occurrence of anaphylactic reaction is 1 in 500,000 persons who receive the vaccine. At all vaccination locations, all persons receiving the vaccine will be monitored under the guidance of a physician to monitor for immediate adverse events after receiving the vaccine and ensure appropriate medical care in the small chance that it is needed.

What about long term side effects?
Any side effects that have been observed in medical trials as well as in the millions of persons that are vaccinated until now resolve within in a few days. It is very unlikely that there will be long term side effects from these vaccines since the vaccine induces a natural immune reaction from your body and the mRNA from the vaccine is broken down and excreted in a natural way by your body. As for all vaccines, there will be ongoing monitoring and registration of any occurring side effects.

Does the vaccine work if I get only one dose?
With the first dose you start the immune reaction, but you need the second dose in order to make the immunity last longer and more effective last. It is important to take the second dose as well to get the maximum protection that the vaccine can give against the Covid-19 virus. Only with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine one dose is sufficient.

Can I get one dose of one type of COVID-19 vaccine and one dose of a different one? The safety and efficacy when combining the different COVID-19 vaccines is not tested and therefore not recommended.

What if I don’t want the vaccine at first but I change my mind? Can I take it later?
The vaccine will be delivered and administered in batches according to the priority groups decided by the Ministry of VSA. If you decide not to take the vaccine when it is your turn, but you change your mind later, it cannot be guaranteed when you will get your next chance, nor that it will be the same type of vaccine.
2. FAQ’s

The COVID-19 vaccines were developed within a year. Is that safe?
Yes it is safe. Because the COVID-19 pandemic has had such an impact on a global level, the development of COVID-19 vaccines was prioritized. The development of the COVID-19 vaccine within a year was possible because of the following reasons:
• The COVID-19 virus is similar to the SARS virus that caused an epidemic in 2003 so some knowledge was already available.
• Different scientists around the world were working on the development simultaneously and shared their knowledge.
• Different stages of the trials were done simultaneously instead of sequentially. However, it is very important to understand that none of the required steps were skipped in any trial or approval process.
• For other vaccines, medical researchers often must wait for funding and the recruitment of enough volunteers, which is a very timely process. However, because the COVID-19 vaccines are so important for the world, manpower and money was made available right away, and volunteers were lining up.
By now, millions of people with all kinds of characteristics and from various cultures, have been vaccinated worldwide and no new safety concerns have risen during this process.

Can the COVID-19 vaccine change my DNA?
An mRNA vaccine or vector vaccine can not change your genes or change anything in your body's DNA in any way. The mRNA in the vaccine is only a recipe for the spike protein, and has no ability to do anything else than give instructions to produce the spike protein. After that, it is broken down by your body in a natural way and only the antibodies that were produced by your body will remain.

Do I need to pay for the vaccine?
No, you do not need to pay.

Is it mandatory to get the COVID-19 vaccine?
No, it is not mandatory to get the COVID-19 vaccine. However, it is highly recommended to get the COVID-19 vaccine once it is made available and you have no contra-indications.
By getting vaccinated you not only protect yourself but also your friends, family and other persons you care about from getting sick from COVID-19. This means that less people get severely ill, less people die, the healthcare system is less burdened, and less people have to stay home from work or school.
Make sure to inform yourself and be able to distinguish information from misinformation by doing your own research based on trusted sources like Government channels, CPS and World Health Organization. It is also advised to be critical about content shared with you on social media, before you forward it to anyone else. Your family doctor can also give you information about vaccines.
Which vaccine will be distributed on Sint Maarten?
Sint Maarten will receive the first batch of vaccines mid-February 2021. This is the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine. Limited doses of vaccines are available at this time. It is expected that later in 2021 the availability will increase substantially. In later batches it is possible that Sint Maarten will receive other brands of vaccines. The brand and quantity of vaccines, including timelines for distribution, depend on the policy of the Dutch government. Any vaccine is approved only after being tested through clinical trials under strict international regulations and meeting all requirements. Only approved vaccines will be distributed and administered to the population.

Who will get the vaccine first?
The availability of vaccines is limited at this time so it cannot be offered to all at once. The Minister of VSA has defined the priority groups according to the advice from the Health Council in the Netherlands to prioritize persons at risk of spreading COVID-19 and persons with increased risk of getting severely ill when they get COVID-19. This means that in the first round of vaccination, the following groups will be offered the vaccine:
- Healthcare professionals
- Persons of age 60 years or older
- Persons aged 18-59 with the following underlying health conditions: diabetes, lung diseases such as asthma, COPD, lung cancer, heart conditions such as angina, rhythm problems or a history of a heart attack, kidney problems, disorders that affect your immune system, being morbidly overweight (a Body Mass Index of over 40) or having a neurological disorder (such as Parkinson’s or ALS) with breathing difficulties.
- Essential workers
- Everyone age 18-59

Note: that this includes persons who are not officially registered. There will be no immigration checks at the vaccination locations.

How can I register for the vaccine?
You are only eligible to receive the vaccine if you have a Sint Maarten ID, or have been on the island for longer than 6 months. Registration can be done via the online registration form which is available in English, Spanish and Creole and can be found on the government vaccination information page.

Both Cole Bay & Dutch Quarter Community Helpdesks are currently equipped to provide information and can assist in registration on the spot. Opening hours 8:30am to 12:30pm Monday to Friday. Don’t forget to bring a form of identification.

Lastly, the paper-based “COVID Vaccine Registration Form” can be picked up at several locations, including Collective Prevention Services (CPS) at the Vineyard Office Park Building, the Division of Labor Affairs at the Simpson Bay Public Service Center in Simpson Bay, Doctors’ offices, the Government Administration Building, and select pharmacies.

After your registration, you will receive an email or whatsapp to inform you about the date, time and location of your vaccination appointment.
What happens during my vaccination appointment?

- You go to the appointed location at the appointed time and date. (Please be on time, as we run a very tight schedule)
- You will be welcomed, and you will have to show an ID to verify that your name and date of birth match with the registration. You will not be checked for resident documents.
- You will be asked to sign a consent form for receiving the vaccine and one for sharing information with health institutions for monitoring purposes. Your information will not be shared with immigration.
- You receive the vaccine in a separate room.
- After receiving your vaccination, you will be led to an observation room where you are asked to wait for 15 min.
- You will receive an appointment for the second vaccination.
- You are thanked, and you can go home.

Can vaccinated persons let go of the preventive COVID-19 measures?

No. At this point in time we know that the vaccines are very effective in protecting against getting severely ill from COVID-19 but we do not know to what extent it protects you from getting infected with COVID-19 and spreading it to others. The first goal is to reduce severe illness and death due to COVID-19 and in this way reduce the burden on the healthcare system.

Even though the first results of vaccination against the COVID-19 virus look promising, research about the effectiveness against getting and spreading COVID-19 is still in progress. When more is known, this will be shared. Also, to obtain herd immunity, at least 70% of the population needs to be fully vaccinated. This will take a few months. All preventive COVID-19 measures will have to stay in place on the level of individual as well as on community level, for the time being.

If you have questions about the Covid-19 vaccine or vaccination rollout strategy on Sint Maarten.
Call 914
or
email to vaccination@sintmaartengov.org

If you have side effect after you vaccination, please report them using this link:
https://onlineservices.sintmaartengov.org/covidsideeffects/