

NH Science Brief: Safety and Effectiveness of COVID-19 mRNA Vaccines in Adults, Adolescents, & Children

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INTRODUCTION

The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna mRNA COVID-19 vaccines have been the primary vaccines available and used during the COVID-19 pandemic to protect against infection, symptomatic disease, severe outcomes and long-term consequences of COVID-19. These vaccines first became available to persons 16 years of age and older in December 2020, and availability subsequently expanded to adolescents 12-15 years old in May 2021, children 5-11 years old in November 2021, and infants and young children 6 months – 4 years old in June 2022. As vaccine expanded to younger age groups, the NH Division of Public Health Services (NH DPHS) has monitored and reviewed the developing global scientific and medical data from study of these vaccines, and has continually updated healthcare providers and other partners about COVID-19 vaccines.¹ This scientific brief summarizes key findings from the large number of studies on COVID-19 mRNA vaccine safety and effectiveness that has been generated from one of the largest vaccination efforts in history.

VACCINES PROTECT AGAINST INFECTION, SYMPTOMATIC DISEASE, & SEVERE DISEASE

Data on protection provided by COVID-19 vaccines comes from multiple sources, including pharmaceutical clinical trials, real-world use vaccine effectiveness studies, and studies that evaluate a person's immune response to vaccination. Because COVID-19 vaccines have become available to different age groups at different times during the pandemic, interpretation of vaccine effectiveness studies must take into account the changes in the circulating COVID-19 variants at the time of study. Study of COVID-19 mRNA vaccines in adults, adolescents, and children have shown the following important findings:

1. A 2-dose primary series with either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine is highly effective against early COVID-19 variants at preventing COVID-19 and severe disease (e.g., hospitalization and death). Pharmaceutical clinical trials for adults, adolescents, and children 5 years of age or older show that both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines were 90% effective or greater at preventing symptomatic disease with equal or greater protection against severe disease, and protection lasted for many months after the second vaccine dose.²⁻⁹

2. Vaccine effectiveness studies from real-world use in the U.S. and multiple other countries have confirmed the pharmaceutical clinical trial findings and have also shown very high 2-dose vaccine effectiveness during the early pandemic until the Delta variant began circulating (summer 2021) in both adults^{[10-25](#)} and adolescents.^{[26-30](#)}
3. Vaccine effectiveness studies from real-world use in children 5-11 years old did not become available until 2022, and at this point the genetically divergent Omicron (BA.1) variant was widely circulating (see findings below). COVID-19 vaccines for infants and younger children down to 6 months of age only recently became available in June 2022 during a period when additional Omicron variants (BA.2, BA.4, and BA.5) were circulating. Therefore, real-world effectiveness studies for this youngest age group are forthcoming. However, results from pharmaceutical trials and study of antibody response to vaccination in infants and younger children have shown a comparable or higher level of protection after vaccination compared to what has been seen in older children, adolescents, and adults.^{[31-33](#)}
4. As time since primary series vaccination increased and the Delta variant emerged, vaccine effectiveness at preventing COVID-19 began to decrease, but vaccines remained very effective at preventing severe disease. With emergence of the Omicron variant, however, there was a notable decrease in the 2-dose vaccine effectiveness even against severe disease. Trends were consistently seen in both adults,^{[6,22-24,34-45](#)} and in children and adolescents.^{[30,46-54](#)}
5. Administration of a booster dose (i.e., 3rd mRNA vaccine dose), was found to be important for increasing protection against COVID-19 and severe disease, especially after Omicron emerged. A booster dose has been shown to significantly increase antibody protection against Omicron variants^{[55-60](#)} and is important for expanding a person's immune response to provide better protection against a range of past and likely future variants.^{[61-62](#)} Booster doses have also been shown to provide greater and longer-lasting protection against COVID-19 and severe outcomes from both Delta and Omicron variants. Findings are consistent in both adults^{[45,63-81](#)} and children and adolescents.^{[46,49,52](#)} One recent study showed that hospitalizations from COVID-19 were 10 times higher in people who were unvaccinated compared with people who had received both a primary series and booster dose when Omicron was the predominant circulating variant.^{[81](#)}

6. Even after a single vaccine booster, however, antibody protection against the genetically divergent Omicron variants (BA.1, BA.2, BA.4, and BA.5) has been found to decrease over the course of 4-6 months, and a second booster dose (i.e., 4th mRNA vaccine dose) results in substantially increased antibody levels.[56,62,82](#) Real-world use vaccine effectiveness studies have similarly shown a decrease in vaccine effectiveness against Omicron variants which can be increased with a second booster dose.[68,71,73,76-77,79,83-87](#)
7. Omicron-targeted booster vaccines have now been developed by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna which have been shown to provide higher levels of antibody protection against Omicron variants. Early data show that these updated vaccine boosters increase a person's antibody protection, provide better protection across a range of different variants, and may provide longer lasting protection.[88-90](#)

VACCINES PROTECT AGAINST OTHER COVID-19 COMPLICATIONS

COVID-19 vaccines protect against longer-term complications that can be caused by COVID-19, sometimes called "Post-COVID Conditions" (PCC), or long-COVID. People can experience a wide range of different symptoms and complications after COVID-19; studies in adults have estimated that 10-20% of adults who develop COVID-19 may experience long-term symptoms or complications.[91-92](#) COVID-19 vaccines have been found to protect against long-COVID symptoms if a person develops infection after vaccination.[93-97](#) Evidence for occurrence of long-COVID in children and adolescents is more limited; however, it appears that children and adolescents are also at risk for long-COVID symptoms, although the risk appears to be lower than compared with adults.[98-102](#)

Development of myocarditis (heart inflammation) after COVID-19 is one significant risk for all ages, including children and adolescents.[102-104](#) One study estimated that about 150 cases of myocarditis occur for every 100,000 persons who develop COVID-19, and the risk of COVID-19 associated myocarditis was highest in young children and older adults.[104](#) Another example of a post-COVID condition which has potentially life-long consequences is development of diabetes. Multiple studies, including in children, have shown an increased risk of new-onset diabetes after COVID-19.[105-111](#) One study estimated that the increased risk of new diabetes in adults was one person for every 100 infected; however, the risk increased for people with baseline pre-diabetes, and for people with more severe disease who required hospitalization.[111](#) Therefore, COVID-19 has both short-term and long-term health implications which can be prevented with vaccination.

Multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) is another COVID-19 syndrome that results in severe body inflammation, multiple organ system dysfunction, and hospitalization. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 8,800 children have been diagnosed with MIS-C resulting in 72 deaths; the most common age group to experience MIS-C after COVID-19 is children 5-11 years of age.¹¹² COVID-19 vaccination has been shown to be highly effective at preventing MIS-C, and the vast majority of children hospitalized with MIS-C are unvaccinated.¹¹³⁻¹¹⁴

VACCINES ARE SAFE

More than 610 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered in the United States since December 2020.¹¹⁵ The pharmaceutical clinical trials have shown that the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines are safe to use in adults, adolescents, and children with very few serious side effects or adverse reactions.²⁻⁹ Real-world safety monitoring has also shown the COVID-19 vaccines to be safe. Two primary monitoring systems have been implemented and used nationally to monitor the safety of vaccines – the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) and v-safe.¹¹⁶⁻¹¹⁸ VAERS requires providers to report all serious adverse events that occur after vaccination, regardless of whether or not the event is associated with vaccination so further investigation can occur; VAERS was designed as an early warning system to detect potential safety signals with vaccines.¹¹⁶⁻¹¹⁷ V-safe is a voluntary smartphone-based system that uses text messaging and web-based surveys to monitor occurrence of common local and systemic side effects that occur after COVID-19 vaccination.^{116,118} Since COVID-19 vaccines have been rolled out to adults, adolescents, and children, these safety monitoring systems have consistently shown that the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines are safe, even in young children and infants.¹¹⁹⁻¹²³ VAERS has found a very small risk of myocarditis after mRNA vaccination, especially in male adolescents and young adults after the second dose.¹²⁴ However, the risk of myocarditis from COVID-19 is estimated to be substantially higher than the risk from vaccination in all age groups, even in young male adolescents and adults who have 2-8 times higher risk of myocarditis from COVID-19 than from vaccination.¹²⁵

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, and they can help prevent life-long complications from COVID-19. Everyone 6 months of age or older should be vaccinated, including with an updated Omicron booster, if eligible.

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