



## COVID-19 Vaccination and Booster Information Frequently Asked Questions

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### **Background:**

Though the rate of infections remains lower than in the past, COVID-19 persists in our communities. Vaccination is the best way to prevent infection, lessen the severity of COVID, and lessen the likelihood of long COVID-19 (symptoms that persist beyond three months). In September 2022, the FDA approved a new bivalent vaccine intended to be more effective for current and future COVID variants. After being rolled out in the fall, bivalent vaccinations are now the only mRNA vaccine formulations that are available. The types of COVID-19 vaccines available may change over time as they are formulated to be more responsive to current variants. This is a similar development process to the annual flu shot that is promoted each fall.

Below are FAQs to address questions on vaccination and current best practices.

### **What**

#### **What is a booster?**

Boosters are an additional dose of vaccine intended to bolster immunity.

Immunity can lessen over time, so a booster keeps antibody levels higher and offers improved protection against serious infection. Vaccines have been very effective at reducing severe infection and reducing hospitalizations and death and reducing the possibility of long COVID (persistent symptoms beyond three months). While the vaccine and booster do not stop you from getting COVID-19, infections are more mild in the vaccinated population than in the unvaccinated. At this point in the pandemic, we are moving away from thinking about the vaccine formulation as a booster and moving towards an annual vaccination model. Because of this, we are moving away from using the term *booster*, and everyone is recommended to receive a dose of the current bivalent vaccine formulation if they have not already received one.

#### **What is the bivalent vaccine and how is it different from prior boosters?**

Both Pfizer and Moderna have developed a bivalent vaccine. There are slight age differences with the Pfizer formulation being available to those 12 years of age or older and the Moderna formulation available for those 18 years of age or older. There are also formulations of the bivalent vaccine available for children ages 6 months and older. The bivalent vaccine has elements to respond to prior COVID-19 variants along with the current variant. As such, it will generate a more broad-based immune response to current and future infections.

**Can I get COVID if I have been vaccinated and/or had a booster?**

Yes. Any resulting illness will be more mild, especially for those who have received the current bivalent vaccine formulation. Data also suggests that long COVID (the persistence of symptoms for greater than a month) is much less common in vaccinated and boosted people.

**Will I need to get an updated vaccine every year, like a flu shot?**

We don't know yet. FDA and CDC are meeting this summer to determine what will be the best vaccination and booster strategy going forward. At the current time, it is recommended that people receive at least one dose of the current bivalent vaccine in order to have the best protection. Medical providers can provide more details about those who are recommended to receive more than one dose of the current formulation.

**Will the bivalent vaccine affect a COVID test?**

No. Receiving a COVID vaccine, including the current bivalent formulation, will not give you a positive test for COVID, nor will it give you the illness or make you contagious.

**If I get a bivalent vaccine, do I still have to stay masked?**

It depends. Masking requirements are still in place in certain work settings. after a close contact exposure in the workplace, and during a workplace outbreak. You are encouraged but not required to mask in other crowded settings such as on transit. Receipt of any vaccine does not alter masking requirements or guidelines.

For example, as of mid-August 2023, [County Health Order No. 2023-01](#) still requires masking in health care facilities when working with patients, clients, or residents, and businesses or facilities can impose their own masking requirements.

**What are the bivalent vaccine's side effects?**

Similar to the initial COVID-19 vaccination, individuals can have a wide range of responses to current formulations. Responses can range from no change, to sore arm at the site of the vaccination, to body aches and flu-like symptoms.

**Who****Who is required to have a COVID vaccine?**

Currently, pursuant to [Health Officer Health Order No. 2023-02](#), personnel who are stationed or routinely assigned to work in designated healthcare facilities and jails— must receive either:

1. The initial series of vaccination plus at least any one booster dose or
2. A single dose of the current bivalent vaccine formulation.

The order does not apply to people who visit the healthcare facilities on an intermittent or occasional basis or for short periods of time, such as firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), paramedics, police, and other law enforcement.

Vaccination is strongly recommended for all other employees.

**Who is eligible for a bivalent vaccine?**

The CDC, the California Department of Public Health, and the SF Department of Public Health all broadly recommend that anyone over 6 months old receive a vaccination. DHR recommends that all City employees receive a bivalent vaccine when they are eligible.

**Will the City require a bivalent vaccine?**

It depends where you work. Employees who are required to have been vaccinated (under current health orders from SFDPH), are those working in healthcare settings or in congregate settings. Those who already received a booster are not required to also receive a bivalent vaccine, but they are encouraged to do so. If they have yet to receive any updated vaccine, they are required to receive a new dose, which will be the bivalent vaccine, as the prior formulations of boosters are no longer available. But the City is not otherwise requiring employees to receive the bivalent vaccine, although it is recommended for all.

**Do I need to have the prior booster in order to receive the bivalent vaccine?**

No. The bivalent vaccine can be administered whether an employee has had a prior booster, has been vaccinated with the original formulation, or has received no vaccine yet for COVID-19. The current vaccine is available to all over six months of age. Employees are encouraged to follow CDC vaccine recommendations, which include receipt of newer formulations like the bivalent vaccine.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/stay-up-to-date.html>

**Can the bivalent vaccine be used as a first-time vaccination?**

Yes. The bivalent vaccine has replaced the original mRNA vaccines. For people who are getting a first-time vaccination for COVID, they will be given a single dose of a bivalent vaccine.

**Can I get a flu shot and bivalent vaccine at the same time?**

Yes. This is safe and convenient.

Many locations are now offering both annual flu vaccine and bivalent vaccine at the same time. HSS will be hosting [fall open enrollment benefit fairs](#) that will offer both annual influenza vaccination and updated fall COVID-19 vaccine.

**How****How do I find a bivalent vaccine?**

Visit [www.vaccine.gov](http://www.vaccine.gov) for a location near you.

Bivalent vaccines have been widely distributed across healthcare settings, local pharmacies, and retail locations.

**Will the vaccine be included in my vaccine record?**

Yes. All COVID-19 vaccine doses are centrally recorded by the State and are included in your vaccine record.

You can download your vaccine record at [www.myvaccinerecord.ca.gov](http://www.myvaccinerecord.ca.gov). Your health care provider also can access this information, but your employer cannot.

**How do I share my vaccine status with my department?**

You may upload your vaccine information to the Employee Portal by going to <https://sfgov.org/sfc/employee-gateway>. Look for the Employee page and click “Update/View Vaccine Status”.

**When:**

**What timing is best for my updated bivalent vaccination?**

The CDC recommends getting a bivalent vaccination no less than two months after your primary series, your last dose, or any COVID-19 infection. However, four to six months after your prior dose or infection is recommended.

Older employees or those with immunocompromised health may seek the vaccination sooner (closer to 2 months after prior dose or infection).

Note that if you have already received the bivalent vaccine, you may not be eligible for another dose until the CDC and FDA release the updated annual vaccine this coming Fall.

**Leave:**

**Can I receive a COVID-19 vaccine dose on work time?**

No. Employees can use accrued sick leave to attend vaccine appointments or to visit drop-in sites. Many locations have weekend or evening appointments.

**If I feel sick after my vaccine, can I use sick leave?**

Yes. If you have a side effect from your vaccination that makes you unable to work, you may use accrued sick leave.