

Nursing Notes: Vaccine Hesitancy, Vaccine Enthusiasm

As I write, planes and trucks are transporting the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine to distribution centers across the United States. As early as Monday, the first immunizations will have been administered.

For some, the news could not be better; the proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel” will glow brighter with each passing week as we immunize more people against our formidable viral foe. For others, news of a Covid vaccine comes wrapped in mistrust and skepticism. As we each make our decision about who in our families will receive the vaccine, it will be important for us to sort out misinformation from accurate data.

Recently, an Aldo parent contacted the school, asking whether the state would likely require all students to receive the Covid-19 vaccine before they return to classrooms. I responded by saying that, although the state had not yet addressed the issue of mandating Covid-19 vaccination, I doubted very much that they would create such a mandate. Immunization exemptions have been part of state protocol during my years as Aldo school nurse, and I have every reason to assume that vaccine exemptions will continue.

In my pre-Thanksgiving Nursing Notes, I mentioned that I’ve always resisted “telling patients what to do” and opt instead for providing to them the best information I can find. To that end, I offer the most pertinent data I’ve found so far about the safety and efficacy of the Covid-19 vaccine. For today, in the interests of space in the newsletter, I will list some of the basic facts about the vaccine; in the coming weeks, I will share more information as vaccine administration commences locally.

1. The Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine has been granted Emergency Use Authorization by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The FDA’s review of Pfizer’s trials is rigorous and founded in epidemiological best practices.
2. At present, the vaccine will be administered to people 16 years of age and older.
3. The vaccine is to be administered in two doses given 21 days apart.
4. Results of clinical trials indicate that a single dose of the vaccine may be 82% effective in preventing the development of Covid-19 symptoms, while the recommended two doses are together confirmed to be 95% effective. Compare this to a typical influenza (flu) vaccine, which is usually around 50% effective.
5. Healthcare providers are directed to avoid giving the vaccine to any individual who has previously experienced a severe allergic reaction (that is, anaphylaxis) to any components of the Covid-19 vaccine. Should anaphylaxis result, vaccine administrators would most likely treat a patient with epinephrine, which a well-staffed vaccine clinic would have on hand. Note: anaphylaxis results most critically in difficulty breathing; swelling at an injection site is not considered a “severe” allergic reaction and is not a sign of anaphylaxis.
6. People receiving the Covid-19 vaccine may very likely experience side effects common to other immunizations. In Covid-19 clinical trials, the 5 most common side effects were pain at the injection site, fatigue, headache, muscle pain, and chills. (A personal note: On Friday afternoon, I received the second of two doses of Shingrix, the shingles vaccine. I awoke the next day feeling like I’d been placed in a burlap bag and beaten with the ugly stick—but the “flu-like symptoms” my nurse had warned me about were gone within 36 hours. Healthcare providers have compared the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine’s side effects to Shingrix’s. Because I knew what to

expect, the Shingrix discomfort didn't alarm me—I just took a day off from running and skipped out on a few honey-dos. Ultimately, I figured 36 hours of discomfort was a small price to pay for shingles prevention.)

7. The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine does not contain SARS-CoV-2, so it cannot give you COVID-19. Messenger-RNA contained within the lipid nanoparticle delivery system prompts an immune response in those who receive the vaccine.

Stay tuned for more information about the vaccine. While there are numerous vaccine articles available at reliable news outlets, it's always useful to read what the FDA, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Mayo Clinic have to say about the vaccine. If you would like to preview the vaccine sheet that is given to people who receive the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine, it is available at <https://www.cvdvaccine-us.com/images/pdf/fact-sheet-for-recipients-and-caregivers.pdf>.

We have a ways to go till this pandemic is over, of course, so don't discard those masks yet. In fact, if your loved ones' well-worn masks are beginning to fray, a new mask can make for a memorable stocking-stuffer next week....

Jim, RN