

Union COVID-19 Response

Coronavirus Vaccine Policies and Frequently Asked Questions

As frontline healthcare and behavioral healthcare workers, members of SEIU Healthcare 1199NW have worked tirelessly to care for our patients and clients during the COVID-19 crisis. We have faced unprecedented challenges and continue to fight in our workplaces every day to ensure we have what we need to safely give the best possible care.

Now, the vaccine is being distributed in acute care hospitals and long-term care facilities across Washington state. As we all know, having a vaccine does not save lives—vaccinations do. Just as we do with the flu vaccine, we encourage healthcare workers to take the coronavirus vaccine. It's only through high utilization that we will be able to beat this virus in the future. The science is strong that this vaccine will protect us from getting COVID-19.

Our Union Policies on the Coronavirus Vaccine

SEIU Healthcare 1199NW has a set of policies on the coronavirus vaccine. We have also sent a letter to all employers demanding that they follow these policies.

- Coronavirus vaccination must not be made mandatory. Our experience with flu vaccination shows that with enough education, the vast majority of healthcare workers take the flu vaccine. Making it mandatory for employees to take a vaccine that is under emergency use authorization only could backfire by decreasing trust in the employer and the new vaccine.
- Vaccine distribution plans must include a robust and transparent education process in cooperation with the Union. All communications to staff regarding the coronavirus vaccine must be translated into any second languages commonly spoken by workers. The history of experimentation on and discrimination against people of color, particularly Black people, in the American healthcare system has created distrust of the healthcare system. Healthcare workers must have the time and ability to learn and ask questions about the vaccine.
- Employers should not use vaccines as a substitute for worker safety and infection control protocols or for ensuring access to personal protective equipment. It is not yet known whether the coronavirus vaccination prevents vaccinated individuals from infecting others. The vaccine was found to be around 95% effective when tested under current conditions of near-universal masking. Employers must still provide healthcare workers with the highest level of PPE recommended by the CDC.
- Workers should be allowed 5 paid days off following inoculation from COVID if they suffer any adverse effects, and the leave must not accrue against any paid leave they have banked. Healthcare workers are electing to take the coronavirus vaccine to protect themselves and others, and to make their workplaces stronger and safer. We should not be penalized for needing time off for any side effects we may have.

Frequently Asked Questions about the Coronavirus Vaccine

What is in the coronavirus vaccine?

The coronavirus vaccine is an mRNA vaccine. mRNA vaccines take advantage of the process that cells use to make proteins in order to trigger an immune response and build immunity to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. In contrast, most other vaccines use weakened or inactivated versions or components of the disease-causing pathogen to stimulate the body's immune response to create antibodies. There is no actual coronavirus in this vaccine.

What are the side effects of the coronavirus vaccine?

Side effects are normal signs that your body is building protection. These side effects may affect your ability to do daily activities, but they should go away in a few days. Common side effects include pain or swelling at the site of injection, and fever, chills, tiredness and headaches throughout the rest of your body. Contact your Primary Care Provider if the redness or tenderness where you got the shot increases after 24 hours, or if your side effects are worrying you or do not seem to be going away after a few days.

If I've already had COVID-19 and recovered, do I still need to get the coronavirus vaccine?

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that individuals should get the vaccine if they have not had an active COVID-19 infection in the last 90 days prior to vaccination.

Can I get the vaccine if I'm pregnant or lactating?

There is limited data on the use of the vaccine for pregnant people. If you are pregnant or lactating and part of a group who is recommended to receive a COVID-19 vaccine (for example, health care personnel), you may choose to be vaccinated. You should discuss this with your health care provider to make an informed decision.

Can I get the coronavirus vaccine if I've had an allergic reaction to a vaccine in the past?

The vaccine should not be given to people with a known history of a severe allergic reaction to any component of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine, such as anaphylaxis. People who have had a severe allergic reaction to any vaccine or injectable therapy (intramuscular, intravenous, or subcutaneous) should not receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at this time.

Why did the coronavirus vaccine get developed so much faster than other vaccines?

Scientists are using a decade of investment in vaccine science research to help develop the vaccine for COVID-19. Since we're in a pandemic, developing a new vaccine can go faster than normal. No steps are skipped, but some steps happen at the same time, like applications, trials, and manufacturing. Washington state has joined other western states to do an additional expert review of the clinical trials results to make sure the vaccine is ready for distribution, and the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine has passed that expert review.

What if I have questions that are not answered here?

If you have questions about our union policies or about how the coronavirus vaccine is being handled in your workplace, talk to your 1199NW delegate or organizer. If you have questions about the coronavirus vaccine itself, you can contact the Washington State Department of Health at COVID.Vaccine@doh.wa.gov. Your Primary Care Provider can also answer your questions about the vaccine's compatibility with your own personal health and medication regimen.