St. Lawrence Health System

COVID-19 Vaccine Reference for SLHS Team 12/14/2020

As COVID-19 vaccines become increasingly available, the general public will look to our team for accurate information to help them make informed health care decisions.

For additional information, please reference our Employee COVID-19 Toolkit under the new COVID-19 9Vaccine Information section.

Topline Key Points

- At St. Lawrence Health System, our team has worked tirelessly to prepare for and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We are now at a turning point in the pandemic – St. Lawrence Health System can expect to start receiving doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine the week of December 14th, 2020.
- To end the pandemic, we need as many people as possible to get vaccinated. We encourage everyone to get the vaccine as soon as it is available to them.
- Our clinical leaders are working closely with federal, state and local health agencies to thoughtfully plan for and prioritize the distribution and administration of the vaccines.
- More people will be able to be vaccinated as we get more doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and the vaccine from Moderna, both of which have proven to be safe and effective.
- While this is a promising step toward curbing the COVID-19 pandemic, we must stay vigilant in observing safety protocols such as continuing to wear a mask, washing your hands frequently with soap and water or using hand sanitizer, and practicing social distancing.

Help our Team Members Indicate Their Choice

- **We encourage everyone to get this vaccine**. However, employees who, after careful consideration, wish to decline the vaccine must indicate their declination as soon as possible.
    - Consult the knowledge builder on how to decline the vaccine, which is posted to our Employee COVID-19 Toolkit section about the vaccine.
- Employees who change their mind may reverse their declination at a later date.
- Please discuss this with your team or supervisor in your next huddle, call, or virtual meeting.

Vaccine Distribution

- We are committed to ensuring the residents of our community have access to this lifesaving vaccine, which has proven 95 percent effective.
- St. Lawrence Health System has developed an integrated, coordinated distribution plan and the rollout will occur in stages according to CDC and New York State Department of Health guidelines.
    - This includes a phased approach since there will be a limited number of COVID-19 vaccine doses available initially – this supply will increase in 2021.
    - We are carefully prioritizing the first doses we receive and are determining recipient criteria based on factors such as acute bedside health care workers who are highest at risk for infection or severe illness.
- In Phase 1a, frontline health care workers at acute care sites will be prioritized as first vaccine recipients. **All vaccine prioritization and distribution is directed by the New York State Department of Health**.
- The New York State Department of Health will direct future distribution phases.

- While we don't know when a vaccine will be available for broad distribution to the community, we are thoughtfully planning and working closely with federal and state health authorities to ensure we are ready for distribution as soon as an authorized vaccine is available.

Vaccine Safety, Efficacy & Side Effects

- Our country's approval process for the safety and efficacy of vaccines is the most robust in the world. All COVID-19 vaccines require rigorous testing and trials to prove the vaccine is safe and effective. U.S. public health agencies have ensured that all vaccines are safe.
- The COVID-19 vaccine is the most effective tool for eradicating this virus and ending the global pandemic.
- The Pfizer vaccine has been proven to be 95 percent effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 when administered in two doses.
    - For comparison, annual flu vaccination is between 40-60 percent effective in preventing influenza.
- Most people will experience minimal side effects following administration of the vaccine.
    - Some patients, however, have reported experiencing side effects that include fever, aches, fatigue and other symptoms. While some of these symptoms may feel severe, they are temporary and typically resolve within a few days.
- While a patient may experience side effects from the vaccine, it's still important for patients to complete the full course of treatment, which includes a second dose of the vaccine, to achieve maximum protection.
- Given the lack of safety data on mRNA vaccines in pregnancy and the discordance among guidelines from various professional societies, St. Lawrence Health System is making no recommendations regarding vaccinating pregnant workers with this vaccine at this time. St. Lawrence Health System will not exclude pregnant workers from getting the vaccine. Pregnant workers should discuss the risks and benefits of the vaccine with their obstetrician.

In addition to the information available in the new COVID-19 Vaccine Information section in our Employee COVID-19 Toolkit, below are some additional details and FAQs from the CDC.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS & TALKING POINTS FROM THE CDC

1. **Question about Vaccine Safety and the Speed of the Vaccine Development** - The federal government, under the umbrella of Operation Warp Speed, has been working since the start of pandemic to make a COVID-19 vaccine available as soon as possible. This accelerated timeline is unprecedented and has raised concerns for some people that safety may be sacrificed in favor of speed. However, as with all vaccines, safety is a top priority.

Patients or Staff may ask: *How do we really know if COVID-19 vaccines are safe?* To respond, you can explain how:

- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) carefully reviews all safety data from clinical trials and authorizes emergency vaccine use only when the expected benefits outweigh potential risks.
- The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) reviews all safety data before recommending any COVID-19 vaccine for use. Learn how ACIP makes vaccine recommendations.

- FDA and CDC will continue to monitor the safety of COVID-19 vaccines, to make sure even very rare side effects are identified.

2. **Questions about Whether It Is Better to Get Natural Immunity Rather than Immunity from Vaccines** - Because some people with COVID-19 can have very mild symptoms, some may see natural infection as preferable to receiving a new vaccine. Others may be concerned that getting a COVID-19 vaccine could make a later illness worse. Help your patients understand the risks and benefits so they can be confident choosing to get vaccinated.

Patients or staff may ask: *Is the vaccine that helpful? I heard getting COVID-19 gives you better and longer immunity than the protection a vaccine can give. Can it actually make my illness worse if I do end up getting COVID-19?* To respond, you can:

- Explain the potential serious risk COVID-19 infection poses to them and their loved ones if they get the illness or spread it to others. Remind them of the potential for long-term health issues after recovery from COVID-19 disease.
- Explain that scientists are still learning more about the virus that causes COVID-19. And it is not known whether getting COVID-19 disease will protect everyone against getting it again, or, if it does, how long that protection might last.
- Describe how the vaccine was tested in large clinical trials and what is currently known about its safety and effectiveness. Be transparent that the vaccine is not a perfect fix. Patients will still need to practice other precautions like wearing a mask, social distancing, handwashing and other hygiene measures until public health officials say otherwise.

3. **Questions about Known Side Effects** - Some COVID-19 vaccines may be more reactogenic than vaccines that people are familiar with. Information about specific side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine will be available when it is approved. It is important to set this expectation with your patient, in case they experience a strong reaction.

Patients or staff may ask: *How much will the shot hurt? Can it cause you to get very sick?* To respond, you can:

- Explain what the most common side effects from vaccination are and how severe they may be.
- Provide a comparison if it is appropriate for the patient (for example, pain after receiving Shingrix for older adults who have received it).
- Make sure patients know that a fever is a potential side effect and when they should seek medical care.
- Let them know that symptoms typically go away on their own within a week. Also let them know when they should seek medical care if their symptoms don't go away.
- Explain that the vaccine cannot give someone COVID-19.
- Explain that side effects are a sign that the immune system is working.

4. **Questions about Unknown, Serious, Long-term Side Effects** - Due to the relative speed with which these vaccines were developed, patients' concerns about long-term side effects are reasonable and to be expected.

Patients or staff may ask: *How do we know that these vaccines are safe when they are so new? Couldn't they cause problems that we don't know about yet? What about long-term problems?* To respond, you can:

- Explain how FDA and CDC are continuing to monitor safety, to make sure even long-term side effects are identified.
- Reassure patients that COVID-19 vaccines will be continuously monitored for safety after authorization, and ACIP will take action to address any safety problems detected.
- Compare the potential serious risk of COVID-19 infection to what is currently known about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

5. **How Many Doses Are Needed and Why?** - All but one of the COVID-19 vaccines currently in phase 3 clinical trials use two shots. The same vaccine brand must be used for both shots.

Patients or staff may ask: *How many shots am I going to need?* To respond, you can:

- Explain that two shots are generally needed to provide the best protection against COVID-19 and that the shots are given several weeks apart. The first shot primes the immune system, helping it recognize the virus, and the second shot strengthens the immune response.
- When applicable, explain the dosing options available and advise the patient that they can set up an appointment before they leave to come back for a second dose.