

AstraZeneca vaccination update: Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

Head of Infection Prevention, Professor Allen Cheng and Infectious Diseases Physician, A/Prof Michelle Giles have answered our questions about the vaccine and what this new advice means.

1. What is the new recommendation?

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recommend for adults under 50 years old, that Pfizer vaccine is preferred over AstraZeneca vaccine. The ATAGI advises the Minister for Health on the National Immunisation Program (NIP) and other immunisation issues.

2. Why was this recommendation made?

Cases of a rare, but serious and unusual clotting disorder - also referred to as thrombosis (blood clots) with thrombocytopenia (low platelet count) - after vaccination have been reported overseas, as well as one case reported in Australia.

The case reported in Australia occurred after approximately 420,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine had been administered. Most, but not all cases of this condition, have been in younger people.

When considering this rare event following vaccination, it is important to also consider the chance of a serious outcome if someone gets infected with COVID. We know that the risks from COVID increase with age – the risk of dying from COVID increases threefold for every 10 years of age.

This means the benefit of the vaccine is higher for older people who are more likely to die from COVID, and the risk of this complication associated with the vaccine is lower in older people. Conversely, the balance of risks and benefits is not as favourable in younger people in Australia, particularly at a time when COVID transmission is low.

3. What is the actual risk of this adverse event?

You can be reassured that this is a rare condition. Based on UK data, the estimated risk of this clotting condition is around one case in 200,000-250,000 vaccine doses administered. This means that 199,999 out of 200,000 people will not get this complication.

The AstraZeneca vaccine is effective at reducing disease and serious illness from COVID.

4. What if I've had my first dose of AstraZeneca?

Data suggests that this clotting disorder only occurs with the first dose of vaccine. In the UK, all 79 cases reported have been following the first dose (from more than 20 million first doses), and no cases have occurred following more than two million second doses.

5. What symptoms or side effects should I look out for that might suggest this clotting syndrome?

The symptoms to look out for are any severe or unexpected symptoms occurring between day four and 20 after vaccination. This includes unusual, severe, or persistent headaches, or severe abdominal pain.

This is different from the common side effects after vaccination, which usually start within 24 hours of vaccination and last one to two days. Common side effects include:

- Injection site pain or tenderness
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Muscle pain
- Fever

If you experience any severe, persistent, or unexpected side effects after vaccination, you should seek medical attention and let your doctor know the details of your vaccination.

6. How can you say the risk of clotting is less severe than the effects of COVID when COVID transmission is not currently in the community?

Even though there is no COVID transmission in the community currently, the situation can change rapidly. We have experienced this in Victoria and seen it recently in other states within Australia. COVID is still a huge problem in many overseas countries, so we anticipate that the Australian population who are largely non-immune to COVID will remain vulnerable especially over the foreseeable future.

7. What if I was booked to have my first dose of AstraZeneca soon?

If you are in the eligible group, aged 50 years or over, you will be able to proceed with your vaccination as planned.

For staff who are under the age of 50 we have temporarily suspended our AstraZeneca vaccination program in line with guidance from the Victorian and Commonwealth governments in response to the new recommendations from ATAGI (8 April 2021).

Please be assured that you will retain your place in the queue. We will advise you when we know more.

8. What if I'm over 50 years of age and haven't yet been vaccinated?

Vaccination is voluntary, and it is important that you're aware of the risks and benefits so you can make an informed decision. You may want to discuss this with your GP or our Specialist Immunisation Service.

Currently, the evidence suggests that the overall risk benefit profile is favourable, especially in individuals over the age of 50 who are at higher risk of severe complications - including dying - if they get COVID infection. Authorities are still recommending this vaccine for people over the age of 50 years.

9. What if I'm younger than 50 years of age and haven't been vaccinated?

The wording of the recommendation states that the Pfizer vaccine is to be used in preference to AstraZeneca vaccine for people under 50 years old.

The Commonwealth Government are developing detailed information to support individuals who may wish to choose to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine to protect themselves from COVID-19, to ensure they are fully informed and have a clear understanding of the small risk associated with this vaccination.

You may wish to discuss this with the Specialist Immunisation Service, who can help explain the risks and benefits in more detail.

10. Has this clotting disorder been reported after the Pfizer vaccine?

No.

In the UK where there is now a high degree of awareness of this clotting disorder, and no cases have been reported after the Pfizer vaccine. This clotting condition has not been reported following the Pfizer vaccine in the United States, where more than 100 million doses of this vaccine have been administered.

11. What if I've had a history of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or pulmonary embolism (PE) in the past?

Further advice is expected soon.

ATAGI has previously recommended that people who have had the conditions heparin induced thrombocytopenia and central venous sinus thrombosis in the past do not receive any COVID vaccine. This advice is under review.