

COVID-19 Vaccines Q&A with Dr. Rhonda Johnson

DHS Provider Session

2/10/2021

Today's informational session began with Linda Kuster introducing Dr. Rhonda Moore Johnson, MD, MPH, a pediatrician originally from Pittsburgh who returned more than 20 years ago. She has recently retired from Highmark BC/BS. She works as an independent contractor with the Allegheny County Health Department to do community education about COVID-19 and vaccinations. After cautioning the audience that this talk was not to be a substitute for a personal consultation with one's doctor and that the opinions are only hers, she began with an overview of COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2).

COVID presents differently in different people and the reason for the difference is unknown, although people who are older or who have certain medical conditions can be at greater risk. of 10 deaths in the US have been people ages 65 and older.

- 50 – 64, chances are one in 50
- Under 24, chances are 1 in 5000
- 180 children have died; they have mostly been Black, Latinx and Native American.

COVID-19 timeline

- Exposure / Pre-symptoms – infected people can go 2-14 days without symptoms, most will feel symptoms between days 4-5
- Day one – first start feeling sick with a wide variety of symptoms
- Days 2-10 – symptoms increase and may have more symptoms
- Days 10-12 – this is typically when those with severe case will need to be admitted to ICU with acute respiratory disease; usually between days 8 and 12.
- Days 10-14 – for those with a mild case of COVID-19, this is typically when they begin to feel better. Cough will last an average of 19 days.

Variants

Because of rapidly emerging coronavirus variants, the pandemic of 2021 is different of the pandemic of 2020. These variants spread more easily and may be associated with an increased risk of death. The virus has mutated (as all viruses do) and this virus has a greater opportunity for natural mutation because of how the widespread disease is. So far, the following mutations have been identified:

- B.1.1.7 (began in UK and is currently in Allegheny County) is doubling every 7 days.
- B.1.351(South Africa and now in South Carolina)
- P.1 variant (Brazil, now in US)

There are sure to be more variants emerging. It is not certain if these variants will be detected by current tests or if they'll be prevented by current vaccines.

Immunity and the COVID-19 vaccine

There are two ways to build immunity: natural (by getting the virus) and vaccination which trains your body to recognize what you are vaccinated against.

Your immune system is your first defense again infection. Thus, sleep, exercise and a healthy diet are key; she also recommends multivitamins.

Vaccine safety

Dr. Johnson stressed that the vaccines are SAFE with few and tolerable side effects. Safety is the top priority of the FDA, which reviews all data from clinical trials. After authorization, the vaccine is monitored by the FDA and CDC.

These trials have been robust; the only unusual feature of these trials is the shorter period of observation after administering the vaccine.

Key facts:

- Vaccines help prevent you from getting sick.
- Those who've had coronavirus will still benefit from being vaccinated.
- Vaccines cannot give you the virus.
- Vaccines will not cause you to test positive on the viral test (you will test positive on the antibody test).
- The virus can stay in urine and stool for up to three months and still be infectious.
- The vaccines do NOT cause infertility.
- There are no microchips or heavy metals in the vaccine.
- Side effects are minor and mostly clear up in 1-2 days.
- Nobody has died from the vaccine.
- There is a lot of transparency online about the vaccine. You can learn about the trials (even the names and demographic information about the participants) and the side effects.
- The vaccine is not recommended for anyone 16 and under right now because there haven't been trials on children. Pfizer and Moderna are currently doing clinical trials on children. Looks like older children will have a vaccine by the end of the summer; there is nothing in the works for younger children..

The COVID-19 vaccine uses messenger RNA (mRNA). mRNA vaccines do not use the virus, never enter the nucleus of the cell and do NOT interact with our DNA. Cells break down and get rid of the mRNA as soon as they are done using the vaccine's "instructions." This is NOT the first mRNA vaccine so we know

they're safe. The mRNA has been used for 40 years and is used for other medications. Originally developed for Ebola and Zika viruses.

Vaccination tips

- The vaccination is free, although the provider may bill your insurance company for an administrative fee.
- Take your photo ID and insurance card with you to the vaccination site.
- No special diet or fasting is needed.
- If you have allergies, talk with your doctor about whether you should get the vaccine. If you do have an allergic reaction, it'll happen mostly within 15-30 minutes after the vaccine, which is why you are required to stay at the vaccination site for a period of time after receiving the injection.
- Keep your card in a special place – you might need it to travel, work or go to school.
- After your first injection (for a two-dose vaccine), enroll in v-safe, which will remind you when you need a second shot.
- After you are vaccinated, continue using all measures to protect yourself and others (masking, hand washing, distancing, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, avoiding crowds and indoor spaces with poor ventilation). Mask layers are important.
- The vaccine doesn't stop you from getting the virus in the nose and throat; it just stops it from entering your body. Thus, it is important that you mask to prevent spreading the disease.

The vaccine is currently voluntary, but this virus is very real. It can kill you in 5 days or leave you with significant long-term health problems (e.g., lung problems/transplant, limb amputation, dementia, heart damage).

Prevention is still the most important thing!

For more information

- CDC
- PA Department of Health
- Allegheny County Health Department
- Dr. Johnson's YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCom_B8Wj5txTJTY6sb8CcQ

Questions from the audience

Q: Is the vaccine safe for pregnancy and breast feeding?

A: The CDC and the Royal College of Obstetrics say that the virus can have devastating effects on the mother's health. You should discuss it with your doctor. There were women in every clinical trial who got pregnant after the trial and nothing happened, but there hasn't been a controlled randomized study.

We don't know if the virus is transmitted in breast milk, but we know it can cross the placenta. To date, no vaccines have ever been found in breast milk.

Q: My husband has severe allergies and, yesterday, we got Pfizer vaccines. We were later told he should have gotten the Moderna vaccine. Is that true?

A: The Moderna vaccine has had lower rates of allergic reactions but both have been administered safely to many people with allergies. Again, talk with your doctor. The reaction, should it occur, would most likely occur within 15-30 minutes of inoculation.

Q: I heard that there are more severe reactions to the second dose of vaccine. Is that true?

A: Dr. Johnson has heard that too, and it's because your body has already begun to respond to the vaccine. But to her knowledge, most reactions are mild and last just a couple of days.

Q: What are your thoughts about schools reopening? And children attending hubs or early learning centers?

A: This is a societal tradeoff. Children are suffering from being out of school and it's taken a big toll (e.g., loss of meals, education, enrichment, socialization). That's why schools try to open, even when they have to reclose. Dr. Johnson understands the need to have children go back to school but schools are germ factories. She wishes that all schools could have been better prepared (ventilation systems, etc.). Teachers need to be especially careful, wearing gloves, serving individual meals, etc. Teachers should be a high-priority group just as healthcare workers are.