

6 Covid-19 vaccine myths dispelled by experts

Fake news and misinformation have seen Covid-19 vaccine uptake dwindle in the past few weeks. Some of the country's prominent infectious disease and vaccine experts debunk some of the myths about the jab doing the rounds.



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Dr Jantjie Taljaard, infectious diseases physician, Tygerberg Hospital, Professor Graeme Meintjes, infectious diseases doctor and deputy head, Department of Medicine, Groote Schuur Hospital and Dr Lisa Frigati, paediatric infectious disease specialist, Tygerberg Hospital explain away some of the most common myths surrounding the Covid-19 vaccinations.

1. Myth – The vaccine will impact negatively on a person with comorbidities (diabetes, cancer, hypertension, lupus, lung disease, TB, HIV etc.)

“People with chronic medical conditions like diabetes, heart failure, asthma, lupus or rheumatoid arthritis, for example, are often uncertain whether they should go for their Covid-19 jab. They fear that it may worsen their underlying condition. I can ensure you today that this is not the case. People with a chronic medical condition are at increased risk of contracting severe Covid-19 and then land up in hospital, ICU or even dying. The main benefit of the Covid-19 vaccination is that it prevents severe Covid-19, hospitalisation and death, specifically in people with increased risk of severe disease,” says Taljaard.

2. Myth - We don't know what the long-term effects of the vaccine

“Many people are afraid of going for their vaccination because they are told by friends, family members and social media that it might cause severe long term side effects. That is completely untrue. Over four-billion people across the world has been vaccinated in the last eight months, and in SA in the last five months. And we have not seen any long-term side effects. In fact, what we have seen is that Covid-19 vaccines, saves lives. In Tygerberg Hospital's Intensive Care Unit during the third wave, all the people admitted, had not been vaccinated. Please save your own life and get the jab, I did,” says Taljaard.

3. Myth – the side-effects are severe and the vaccine will kill you

"I want to make it clear that Covid vaccinations do have side effects, like any vaccination. The common side effects include pain or redness at the injection site, headache, muscle pains and fever or chills. These are usually mild or moderate and get better after a day or two. There are also severe and sometimes life-threatening side effects of the vaccine, but these are exceedingly rare – we know that if one-million people are vaccinated with a Covid vaccine fewer than five people among them will develop life-threatening complications. These very rare side effects include anaphylaxis (a severe allergic reaction), blood clots and inflammation of the heart. There are treatments for these side effects and that's one of the reasons why it is important that the medical profession and public are aware of these extremely rare side effects. It is, however, very clear that the risk of dying of a severe Covid-19 disease far outweighs these exceedingly rare side-effects, and that the vaccine offers great protection against severe illness and even greater protection against death due to the virus," says Meintjes.

4. Myth - Vaccines can harm your body

"I want to stress that with any medical intervention (treatment or prevention) there are benefits and potential harms. It is only justified for the medical profession to recommend and provide an intervention if the benefits far outweigh the potential harms. That is the case with Covid vaccinations. The benefits in terms of preventing death and hospitalisation due to Covid far outweigh the risks of these exceedingly rare side effects.

"To put it in perspective, it is estimated, from Medical Research Council's excess death statistics, that over 20,000 people have died from Covid in the Western Cape. We know that vaccinating a large percentage of the adult population in the province would very effectively prevent many deaths going forward – saving thousands of lives. There is a risk of life-threatening side effects from Covid vaccines, but the data suggests that these would affect fewer than 20 people if we vaccinated all adults in the Western Cape. The benefits of vaccination in terms of thousands of lives saved far outweighs the risks of these exceedingly rare side effects.

"For the last 18 months I have worked in the Covid wards at Groote Schuur. While I have seen hundreds of people die as a result of Covid, I have not yet seen a single death due to the vaccination. I know that we now have the means to prevent most deaths from Covid going forward - through the vaccination. I appeal to every single adult in our country to get vaccinated – to protect our hospitals from another wave of Covid, but more importantly to protect your own life. Please get vaccinated and don't delay," says Meintjes.

5. Wrong assumption - You can still get Covid-19, so no point in getting the vaccine

"The point of being vaccinated is that your chances of getting severe disease, ending up in hospital or even dying, are severely decrease. The current variant circulating in the Western Cape is the Delta variant, and recent research shows that the J&J vaccine, that all the healthcare workers received (over 480,000 healthcare workers) is shown to be 96% effective against death and 66% effective against severe illness requiring hospitalisation. That is why you should be vaccinated. Ideally, we would like a vaccine that also stops us from getting infected with the Corona virus but until then, the benefits of reducing severe disease, and not dying, decreases the burden on hospitals," says Frigati.

6. Myth - The Covid-19 vaccines were developed too fast to be safe

"The reason that we have a vaccine so quickly is because of the massive political will and huge amount of funding that went into the development of the vaccine. Just because it was developed quickly does not mean it is not safe. Over the last eight months, billions of people all over the world have now received the vaccine and there are only very rare side effects," says Frigati.

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