

Frequently Asked Questions about Smallpox: The Vaccine

If I am concerned about a smallpox attack, can I go to my doctor and request the smallpox vaccine for my family and myself?

At the moment, the smallpox vaccine is not available for members of the general public. While there are sufficient supplies of the vaccine for everyone who would need it in the event of an emergency, the government policy for vaccination in the absence of a smallpox attack is under consideration. A decision has not been made.

How safe is the smallpox vaccine?

The smallpox vaccine is the best protection you can get if you are exposed to the smallpox virus. Most people experience normal, usually mild reactions that include a sore arm, fever, and body aches. In recent tests, one in three people felt bad enough to miss work, school, a recreational activity or they had trouble sleeping after receiving the vaccine. But, the vaccine is not without risks. It is made with a live virus called vaccinia that can cause serious damage both to people vaccinated and to those with whom they come in close contact.

Who should NOT get the vaccine?

People who should not get the vaccine are:

- ◆ anyone who is allergic to the vaccine or any of its components;
- ◆ women who are pregnant;
- ◆ anyone under the age of 18;
- ◆ people who now have, or have had, skin conditions (especially eczema and atopic dermatitis) and
- ◆ people with weakened immune systems, such as those who have received a transplant, are HIV positive, or are receiving treatment for cancer, or are currently taking medications like steroids that suppress the immune system. These people should not receive the vaccine unless they have been exposed to smallpox.

What is the smallpox vaccine made of?

The vaccine is made from a virus called vaccinia, which is another “pox” type virus related to smallpox. The smallpox vaccine helps the body develop immunity to smallpox. It contains the “live” vaccinia virus – not dead virus, like many other vaccines. For that reason, the vaccination site must be cared for carefully to prevent the virus from spreading.

Many vaccinations are required; why don't people get the smallpox vaccine?

The last case of smallpox in the United States was in 1949. The last naturally occurring case in the world was in Somalia in 1977. After the disease was eliminated from the world, routine vaccination against smallpox among the general public was stopped because it was no longer necessary for prevention.

How long does a smallpox vaccination last?

Past experience indicates that the first dose of the vaccine offers protection from smallpox for 3 to 5 years with decreasing immunity thereafter. If a person is vaccinated again later, immunity lasts even longer.

Is every American going to be vaccinated for smallpox?

If there is an outbreak of smallpox, there is enough vaccine for everyone who would need it. The government policy regarding vaccination in the absence of a smallpox outbreak is still under consideration.