



## COVID-19 and the COVID-19 Vaccine: What You Should Know For the Loved Ones of Those Who Are Incarcerated

This information sheet provides necessary information about COVID-19 and the COVID-19 vaccine for the loved ones of people who are incarcerated.

### WHAT IS COVID-19?

The coronavirus disease 2019, commonly referred to as COVID-19, is a newly discovered disease caused by a virus.

COVID-19 spreads through small droplets in the air when an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes. **It spreads the easiest when people are in close proximity with each other (up to 12 feet).**

As a virus, COVID-19 also changes. **New strains** of the virus are also circulating and are reported to be **50% to 70% more contagious** than the previous version.

Because COVID-19 is new, your body has not yet developed a defense against it. This makes the virus especially dangerous. People who are older or who have an existing medical condition (like diabetes, high blood pressure, or asthma) are much more likely to contract, develop serious illness, and die from COVID-19.

**COVID-19 is far more harmful and deadly than the flu.** According to one study, the death rate among hospitalized COVID-19 patients was 18.5%, compared to 5.3% among those with the flu. COVID-19 patients were nearly five times more likely to die than flu patients. **COVID-19 patients were also four times more likely to require breathing machines than flu patients.** (Source: US Department of Veteran Affairs/BMJ).

**Systemic racism also makes COVID-19 deadlier for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx/Hispanic populations,** which are much more likely to be exposed to the virus, to be hospitalized and/or receive unequal health care if they get the virus, and to die of the virus.

It is impossible to know for certain how COVID-19 will affect your loved ones, so you should recommend them to **take steps to prevent COVID-19.** These steps include:

- **Wear a mask** when around others.
- **Frequently wash hands** or use hand sanitizer if a substitute is needed.
- **Avoid touching your face.**

### WHY IS COVID-19 A SPECIAL THREAT TO PEOPLE IN JAILS AND PRISONS?

To protect against the spread of the virus, we need to limit close contact and use personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks. Prisons, jails, and detention centers are crowded and often lack essential materials. These problems make it very difficult to distance and access basic PPE. In response, some people in these facilities have had to create their own masks, for example, out of shirts or other materials.

This is why **1 in 5 people in prison have tested positive for COVID-19, a rate of infection that is four times higher than the general population.** Because of these dangerous conditions, the best way to protect health and safety is to reduce the number of people in these facilities through **decarceration**—the drastic reduction of the incarcerated population at any given facility. If decarceration is not happening, other tools exist including **applications for compassionate release.** These applications are especially effective if individuals are particularly vulnerable (i.e. have an existing medical condition or are older) to COVID-19 and feel like their health and safety would be endangered if they get the virus.

**Your loved ones have a right to be protected.** If a loved one does not have appropriate access to PPE take action by contacting advocacy organizations, legal aid groups, and/or your local and state representatives.

History shows that prisons, jails, and detention centers are not designed to be sites of health care and well-being. As everyone who has been on the inside knows, they are sites of punishment with an unambiguous track record of unethical, inhumane, and degrading treatment of individuals. These problems make even more important the need to 1) understand what COVID-19 is and 2) choose options that both safeguard constitutional rights and protect the health of your loved ones. This document is designed to help achieve both those goals and assist in case help is needed.

## WHAT IS THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

**Vaccines are essential to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic.** Once infected with a virus, your immune system defends your body against the virus. A vaccine helps your body build up a strong defense to a new virus. **This creates immunity, or protection against disease.**

When enough people have the vaccine, the virus will not continue to spread widely.

People receive vaccines at every stage of life, from infancy to old age. These vaccines help save millions of lives.

The federal government has approved several versions of the COVID-19 vaccine, which are **safe and effective** in protecting against the virus. These vaccines are being **manufactured and shipped** to medical facilities all around the world.

## HOW DOES THE VACCINE WORK?

The Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson versions of the vaccine are very effective. These vaccines give your body a way to **recognize the COVID-19 virus and build protections against it.** While we are still learning about the COVID-19 vaccines, our current knowledge tells us that most require two doses to work best. For these vaccines, you must receive a second dose three to four weeks later.

Research shows that these vaccines are **very safe.** Before they were made available to the public, vaccines were tested on thousands of people across the country, including Black and Latinx (or Hispanic) individuals—a process designed to ensure the safety of the vaccines. That said, incarcerated populations were not included as part of the vaccine testing.

Although a **few cases of allergic reactions have been reported, they are rare. If your loved ones have had past allergic reactions to vaccines, they should contact a medical professional immediately for extra precautions.** Nurses and doctors **have an ethical and legal responsibility to their patients' medical care.** They should be able to answer whether your loved ones should proceed with vaccination or not.

## WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF THE VACCINE?

The vaccine **alone is not enough to stop COVID-19 spread.**

Even after getting the vaccine, everyone will need to **continue wearing a mask, washing hands, and avoid touching their faces** to protect themselves and others.

## ARE THERE SIDE EFFECTS FROM THE VACCINE?

The COVID-19 vaccine **can often lead to mild side effects** like those associated with a normal flu. They include pain, redness or swelling on the arm, fever, fatigue, headache, muscle pain, chills, and joint pain.

**Side effects are normal. They are a sign that the body is developing resistance to COVID-19.** If they are occurring, they should go away shortly.

## HOW DOES THE VACCINE SPECIFICALLY AFFECT PEOPLE IN JAILS AND PRISONS?

The country's leading public health organizations and experts have found that incarcerated individuals are some of the most vulnerable to COVID-19. This means that jails, prisons, and other correctional facilities **must be prioritized to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.**

The long history of racist medical experimentation, coercion, and manipulation cast a long shadow on America's public health system and people's trust in it. **Your loved ones are within their rights to ask about everything they want to know about the vaccine,** such as: about any potential side effects, how effective it is against COVID-19, how long the vaccine will protect against the virus, and whether it will impact health in the future or affect other health issues.

**As a general rule, consent is necessary before receiving a vaccine. It should be free and come with no strings attached. If people have equitable access and are able to make well-informed and free decisions about their health, the COVID-19 vaccine could be an important means of racial equity considering that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx (or Hispanic) communities are most affected by COVID-19.** That said, **vaccines will not eliminate high rates of incarceration in the United States. These high rates of incarceration are a public health crisis; addressing this problem requires mass releases from prison.**

It is important to note that **COVID-19 vaccines are being given in many countries** and in hospitals, nursing homes, schools, community centers, and clinics, in addition to prisons, jails, and detention centers.

**But it is also important to note that settings matter.** Across history, incarcerated people and those in other institutional settings have been victims of racist medical treatment, coercion, and exclusion. This history presents a challenge to incarcerated people and their families. **Every person must make their own decisions about their health.**

**The way the vaccine is offered in “correctional” facilities matters a lot.** Depending on what state departments do, people in prisons, jails, or detention centers may feel pressured to take the vaccine. Others may feel pressured to not take the vaccine. The circumstances for an incarcerated person may be full of trade-offs. This is an unethical and unjust situation. A patient’s permission (consent) and confidentiality are very important requirements in medical practice and medical ethics.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**asha bandele**  
Galaxy Gives

**Benjamin Barsky**  
Justice, Health, and Democracy Rapid Response Initiative,  
Harvard University

**Megan Comfort**

**Alex Duran**  
Galaxy Gives

**David Harris**  
Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at  
Harvard Law School

**Tyler Harvey**  
SEICHE Center for Health & Justice, Yale University

**DeAnna Hoskins**  
JustLeadership USA

**Lily Jacobs**

**David J. Knight**  
Justice, Health, and Democracy Rapid Response Initiative,  
Harvard University

**Reuben Jonathan Miller**  
University of Chicago

**Vivian D. Nixon**  
College & Community Fellowship

**Haena Park**  
Galaxy Gives

**Swati Rayasam**  
#StopSanQuentinOutbreak Coalition, University of California,  
San Francisco

## INDIVIDUAL SIGNATORIES

**Robin Steinberg**  
The Bail Project

**Bruce Western**  
Square One Project and Columbia University

## INSTITUTIONAL SIGNATORIES

**JustLeadershipUSA**

**Advance Peace**

**The Bail Project**

**Covid Act Now**

**COVID Prison Project**

**Ella Baker Center for Human Rights**

**Health in Justice Action Lab**

**Liberation Lab at Harvard University**

**National Homelessness Law Center**

**Scattergood Program for Applied Ethics of Behavioral  
Health Care at the University of Pennsylvania**

