

First COVID-19 vaccines given locally

In a historic moment, Dr. Elizabeth Sundberg was one of the first staff at Jacobson Memorial Hospital Care Center (JMHCC) to receive a vaccine for COVID-19 on Wednesday morning, Dec. 30.

Moderna COVID-19 vaccines were made available to hospital staff last week, while long-term care residents were expected to be immunized this week or next week. The vaccine is followed with a booster shot 28 days later. JMHCC is not requiring staff or residents to get the vaccine.

Federal and state officials have designated long-term care residents, health care staff and first responders as a priority for the first phase of distribution for the COVID-19 vaccine, while public immunizations will be made available next.

“It is going to depend on how many doses North Dakota is allocated and how many long-term residents and health care workers want to receive it before it goes to the next priority group,” said JMHCC Director of Nursing TyAwna Ackerman. “Eventually, we’re supposed to be able to receive so much a week to get everyone vaccinated.”

Sundberg said she will recommend the vaccine to her patients as it is made available.

“One of the most amazing things is most vaccines are considered to be great successes if they are 50 to 70 percent effective. Both the Moderna and the Pfizer, based on the studies we have so far, are running 90-plus. That’s unheard of,” Sundberg said.

Based on evidence from clinical trials, the Moderna vaccine was 94.1 percent effective at preventing laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 illness in people who received two doses who had no evidence of being previously infected, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The COVID-19 vaccine is different from more standard vaccines.

Messenger RNA vaccines – also called mRNA vaccines – are some of the first COVID-19 vaccines authorized for use in the United States. mRNA vaccines are a new type of vaccine to protect against infectious diseases. To trigger an immune response, many vaccines put a weakened or inactivated germ into our bodies. Not mRNA vaccines. Instead, they teach our cells how to make a protein – or even just a piece of a protein – that triggers an immune response inside our bodies. That immune response, which produces antibodies, is what protects us from getting infected if the real virus enters our bodies. mRNA vaccines do not use the live virus that causes COVID-19, according to the CDC.

“They send a little instruction sheet to the body and basically says, ‘This is going to be the protein and you’re going to hate it,’” Sundberg described. The body then produces antibodies to protect against a COVID-19 infection.

“It’s essentially a way to get a much faster and higher response,” she said. “It’s also a much cleaner vaccine.”

While both the Moderna and the Pfizer vaccines are stored at cold temperatures, Pfizer’s needs a special freezer to keep the vaccine at minus 94 degrees, while Moderna’s vaccine can be kept in a regular freezer, making it more user-friendly and transportable to rural areas.

The N.D. Department of Health has provided an update regarding COVID-19 vaccine priority groups.

“We don’t know when the vaccine will be available for the public, but the public can call the clinic and be placed on a list if they are interested,” Ackerman said. “The public should know that when the vaccine is available, they will need an appointment and initially appointment times will be very limited. This is due to the vaccine being a multidose vial. Once the vial is opened, it has to be used within a couple hours. We’re not going to be able to be as flexible with administration as the influenza vaccine.”

Sundberg pointed out that COVID-19 is not similar to influenza, and has proven to have more long-term effects for some.

“We’re finding more and more of these long-haulers, more and more people with chronic impairment because of leftover damage,” she said. “If you got through influenza, you recovered virtually 100 percent. If you lived, you were fine, but we’re finding more and more people who do get through COVID that spend six months getting back to household ambulatory.”

JMHCC will continue to take all necessary precautions after the vaccine is administered, including wearing personal protective equipment and conducting regular testing, to ensure the safety of residents, staff and patients.

To learn more about the COVID-19 vaccine, visit the CDC website, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus.

State sets priority list for COVID-19 vaccine

The N.D. Department of Health (NDDoH) has provided an update regarding COVID-19 vaccine priority groups.

The North Dakota COVID-19 Vaccination Ethics Committee, which includes a physician, ethicist, local public health representative, representative of the N.D. Department of Human Services and a representative of the N.D. Department of Health, has recommended who should receive the still-limited supply of the vaccine.

Though health care providers are still working through Phase 1A – comprised of frontline health care workers, first responders and long-term care residents and staff – the ethics committee has prioritized who will qualify for Phases 1B and 1C.

Phase 1B (in order of priority):

- Persons age 75 and older
- Persons age 65-74 with two or more high-risk medical conditions
- Staff and persons living in other congregate settings (corrections, group homes, treatment centers, homeless shelters)
- Persons age 65 and older with one or more high-risk medical conditions
- Persons age 65 and older with or without high-risk medical conditions
- Persons with two or more high-risk medical conditions regardless of age
- Child care workers
- Workers employed by preschools or kindergarten through 12th grade: Teachers, nutritional services, aides, bus drivers, principals, administrative staff, custodians, etc.

Phase 1C (in order of priority):

- North Dakota National Guard, not previously covered
- Grocery workers
- Public safety answering points (911)
- Manufacturing related to the development or supply of COVID-19 vaccine
- Other health care/public health workers not included in phase 1A
- Free-standing clinical laundries
- Public transit, including bus, taxi, ride-share
- Persons age 16-64 with one or more high-risk medical conditions
- Blood bank workers not previously vaccinated
- Information technology
- All other essential workers per Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)

NDDoH will announce when the state will move on to Phase 1B. It is anticipated that this may occur in mid-January. Depending on local vaccine acceptance and supply, it is possible that different areas of the state may be vaccinating within different priority levels.

Following Phase 1C, the state will move to Phase 2, which includes the general public.

To date, 19,097 health care workers and long-term care residents in North Dakota have received their COVID-19 vaccination. More than 2.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been administered in the United States. For more information on the COVID-19 vaccine and phases of vaccination, visit health.nd.gov/covidvaccine.