

January 2021

Dear BMMSA Rheumatology Patients:

Happy 2021! We hope this letter finds you safe and okay. We write to give you information regarding the COVID vaccine and strongly urge **ALL** our patients to get vaccinated. We address some of your possible concerns below:

I am worried that the vaccine is too new and is not well studied.

Researchers cut no corners in vaccine development. The science behind this type of vaccine is both sound and thrilling. Vaccine research for similar viruses has been ongoing for over fifteen years. That work has allowed the development of effective COVID vaccines now available to combat this pandemic. We stand with science. We, your rheumatology doctors, have all had the first of two doses. Some have received Moderna and some BioNtech/Pfizer. They are equally safe and effective.

People of color are at higher risk for more severe COVID infection, complications, and death. Our country's sordid history of inappropriate experiments without consent (such as the Tuskegee experiments) leads some people of color to distrust the medical system and new treatments. We understand your concerns. We want to let you know we all received it as soon as we could. We cannot wait for our own families to get it.

I am worried that the vaccine may cause my autoimmune disease to flare.

We suspect most patients will **NOT** have increased symptoms of their autoimmune disease after vaccination. It is easier to manage a disease flare than severe COVID. Despite all we've learned after almost ten months, a percentage of patients with COVID die, and survivors can have long term symptoms from organ injury.

Do I have to stop my medication before I get the vaccine?

No, there is no need to stop your medication before getting or after receiving the vaccine. If you receive treatment with rituximab (Rituxan), we would like you to have a discussion with your doctor to discuss when to get the vaccine to optimize its effectiveness for you.

I am worried that the vaccine is going to give me the virus.

The short answer is **NO, IT WON'T.** Many vaccines put a weak or inactive germ into the body to get the immune system to fight infection. The current covid vaccines do not contain a live virus. Instead, instructions are introduced into our cells to make a protein (the COVID spike protein) found on the virus surface. The body will recognize the protein as foreign. The immune system then produces antibodies against this protein. The antibodies will protect if the real virus infects the body. The instructions from the vaccine break down and disappear. You will have the benefit of protection without the severe consequences of illness.

The vaccine may mostly give you a sore arm. If you do feel achy, tired, or sick after getting the vaccine, congratulations! This is a normal reaction. These symptoms result from your immune system's successful preparation of a defense to the virus.

I already had COVID; do I need the vaccine?

If you had COVID, your body might have made protective antibodies. However, we do not know how long antibodies are protective. The vaccine gives you the best chance of having as much protection as possible. We recommend getting the vaccine even if you had COVID infection.

Why do I need to continue mask-wearing and social distancing after vaccination?

Although the vaccine or the COVID infection may prevent you from getting sick, you may still be able to pass the virus to others. Continue to be safe. Wear a mask! Protect your loved ones and coworkers, and essential workers around you.

Again, we urge you to get your COVID vaccine as soon as the opportunity arises. If you call our office to ask if you should be vaccinated, the answer will be YES! If you call to ask when you should get the vaccine, in general, the answer will be as soon as you can. If you have questions about the vaccine's timing with your medication, please let us know, and our office will get back to you.

We are all together in this fight. The more quickly we are all vaccinated, the faster we can move forward.

Sincerely,

Your Doctors.

