Ask the experts

COVID-19 Vaccination and your family

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With so much information around about COVID-19 and vaccination, it can be difficult to work out what to believe and how best to protect your family's health. The article features an interview with Prof. Paul Johnson and Dr. Linny Phuong from the North Eastern Public Health Unit (NEPHU).

The NEPHU is led by Austin Health in collaboration with Eastern Health and Northern Health. The focus of the NEPHU is to:

- Strengthen the public health response to COVID-19
- Be closer to, and more engaged with, local communities
- Provide more efficient care and public health functions, such as testing, contact tracing, case, and outbreak management
- Rapidly respond to new cases and outbreaks.

Prof. Paul Johnson is the Director of NEPHU and an Infectious Diseases Physician at Austin Health and The University of Melbourne.

Dr Linny Phuong is a children's specialist in infections. She works at NEPHU as one of the Medical Leads; and also as a specialist at the Royal Children's Hospital, Austin Health and Cabrini Health.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. **We hear of vaccinated people catching COVID-19. Does vaccination protect people from COVID-19?**

   Professor Paul Johnson:
   Yes, people who have been vaccinated (2 doses) can still be infected with COVID and the risk increases progressively from about 4 months after completing the second dose. However, the risk of going from infected to very sick is reduced for longer than this. Effectiveness wanes over time and it now appears that COVID vaccines will need to follow a 3-dose schedule, not two as originally announced.

2. **Can COVID-19 vaccination effect your fertility and is it safe during pregnancy?**

   Professor Paul Johnson:
   COVID vaccines do not affect fertility, this is an urban myth that understandably frightens people. There is no biological reason why, or any medical evidence for an effect of COVID

vaccination on fertility. There is evidence that COVID during pregnancy (since the arrival of delta variant) is more likely to lead to illness in the mother, admission to hospital and premature labour. COVID vaccination in pregnancy is highly recommended.

3. **Is it safe for teenagers to get vaccinated?**

   Dr Linny Phuong:
   Yes. Many teenagers overseas have had been vaccinated safely against COVID-19. Vaccination in this age group is important because we know there is a high chance of becoming infected or becoming very unwell with COVID-19.

4. **Why should children get vaccinated when COVID-19 may not affect them as severely as adults?**

   Dr Linny Phuong:
   In general, younger children have mild symptoms or no symptoms. However, for those with underlying medical conditions, vaccination is important to protect them from ending up in hospital. Younger children are very likely to bring home COVID-19 from their childcare centres and schools. Infection is a big problem for those households where there are elderly adults or those with serious medical conditions. We are still waiting for more information from around the world, about how worried we need to be with the omicron variant of COVID-19 in children.

5. **If you have had COVID-19 in the last 6 months, do you still need to have a booster shot?**

   Professor Paul Johnson:
   As a national guideline, COVID infection is regarded as preventing re-infection for an official period of 6 months. However, it is characteristic that immunity wanes quite quickly with some classes of viruses (such as corona viruses, like COVID-19). Other viruses like measles, create lifelong immunity after a natural infection - so immunity duration depends on the particular characteristics of the virus. Because COVID is a corona virus and waning immunity after infection is the rule, it is recommended to have a booster after you have recovered from COVID.

6. **Are booster shots necessary? When is the best time to have a booster?**

   Professor Paul Johnson
   Yes, a booster (to make 3 doses in total) is highly recommended. National guidelines are now that we qualify for a booster 3 months after a primary course or 2 shots. Note this schedule is very similar to the recommended vaccine schedule for Hepatitis B for adults (Hepatitis B: dose one on day 1, dose two 1 month after dose one, dose three 5 months after dose 2).

   Dr Linny Phuong:
   Booster shots are needed to make sure the body has long term protection against COVID-19. Booster vaccinations are recommended 3-4 months after the second dose.

If you have more questions or concerns about COVID-19 vaccination, talk to your GP, Medical Specialist, or your local vaccination service.

Where to get vaccinated: https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/vaccine

To ask our experts a question go to: https://m.facebook.com/NEPHUMelbourne/