

Guidance Statements & Policies

December 15, 2020



OU/RCA COVID-19 Vaccine Guidance

The following is shared based on the guidance of our poskim, Harav Hershel Schachter שליט"א and Harav Mordechai Willig שליט"א, with the support of Harav Dovid Cohen שליט"א.

We are grateful for the progress that has been made in vaccine development for COVID-19. הודו לד' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו.

Halacha obligates us to care for our own health and to protect others from harm and illness. In addition, Halacha directs us to defer to the consensus of medical experts in determining and prescribing appropriate medical responses to both treating and preventing illness.

There has long been an almost uniform consensus among leading medical experts that vaccines are an effective and responsible manner of protecting life and advancing health. For over two hundred years vaccinations have been responsible for the dramatic reduction of many terrible diseases and have significantly improved public health in our country and around the world. For this reason, the consensus of our major poskim (halachic decisors) is to encourage us to use vaccinations to protect ourselves and others from disease.

While this guidance of our poskim has addressed vaccine usage generally, the introduction of the novel COVID-19 vaccines required specific reconsideration. The poskim recognize that the COVID-19 vaccines have been developed with unprecedented speed and are expected to be made available under an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). In addition, the two currently leading COVID-19 vaccine candidates are mRNA vaccines which employ a new vaccine technology.

Notwithstanding these factors, the conclusion of our poskim is that, pursuant to the advice of your personal health care provider, the Torah obligation to preserve our lives and the lives of others requires us to vaccinate for COVID-19 as soon as a vaccine becomes available.

Our medical and scientific advisors have clarified that efforts to speed vaccine development to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have not sacrificed scientific standards, the integrity of the vaccine review process, or safety. Rather than cutting corners, the acceleration has been achieved by marshalling unprecedented financial resources, creating multiple partnerships, and removing virtually all non-scientific bureaucratic hurdles. These efforts have not, however, involved a reduction in the appropriate safety standards or a decrease in the standard, multiple levels of scientific review.

These efforts appear to have been successful beyond all expectations and have produced more than one vaccine with an unusually high rate of effectiveness with no indications of any significant risk. While no medical intervention can be considered risk-free, expert opinion is clear that the enormous benefits presented by these vaccines far outweigh their risks.

In consideration of the guidance of our poskim, we strongly encourage all those eligible to access the COVID-19 vaccination to do so. We hope and pray that such steps will help bring to an end the tragic toll that the pandemic has taken on our community and beyond.

Per the guidance of our medical and scientific advisors, for those who have had the virus and an already demonstrated sustained antibody response the vaccine remains safe and potentially helpful but appears to be less necessary.

We note that the availability and use of the COVID-19 vaccine will not immediately allow us to reduce adherence to current mitigation strategies, including social distancing, masking, and diligent hand hygiene. These practices must continue to be followed until official public health recommendations advise otherwise. As long as these practices remain in place it remains unnecessary to consider institutional policies or additional restrictions regarding the non-vaccinated.

This guidance is intended as general guidelines and should not be construed by any individual as, or be substituted for, medical or other professional advice. Personal decisions regarding the vaccine should be discussed with your healthcare provider. Moreover, this guidance is formulated based solely on currently available information. Events and information continue to evolve and may impact the applicability of this guidance.

We hope and pray that we will soon be blessed by Hashem to be able to come together comfortably and safely.