



Australian
Academy of Health and
Medical Sciences

Media Release

COVID-19 vaccines will protect individuals, families and communities

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Expert health and medical science leaders welcome vaccine roll-out, but caution that the vaccines alone are not enough.

The COVID-19 vaccination roll-out is a major development for Australia. It will enable people to take action that will help to protect themselves, their families and the wider community from a disease that has killed millions of people and impacted everyone, says the country's expert body in the health and medical sciences.

The Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (AAHMS) is an independent body comprising more than 400 senior researchers and health leaders. It has been active in monitoring and guiding the nation's pandemic response.

The Academy [released a formal statement](#) today stating that the robust review processes of the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) mean that Australians can be confident that approved vaccines meet strict safety and efficacy criteria.

"The vaccines being offered in Australia will provide a new level of protection for our community," says Professor Tania Sorrell, Academy Fellow and University of Sydney infectious diseases researcher.

"Now we have the tools to help save lives and reduce the social and economic impact of the pandemic."

Last December AAHMS [released a report on Australia's pandemic response](#) that warned against seeing vaccines as silver bullets.

"Vaccinating our population, and that of the rest of the world, will take quite a bit of time," says Professor Brendan Crabb, Academy Fellow and Director and Chief Executive Officer of Melbourne's Burnet Institute.

"So it is critical that for the foreseeable future we continue to use public health measures, including physical distancing, hand hygiene, the judicious use of face masks, good ventilation and effective controls at international borders."

In its statement today, the Academy highlights the robust review processes undertaken by the TGA which have enabled rapid approval for the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines.

"The vaccines have been subject to a full, not emergency, review by the TGA. We also have the phase 3 trial data and ongoing surveillance by regulatory agencies in the UK and Israel, with Europe to come," said Professor Tony Cunningham, Academy Fellow and an infectious diseases expert at the University of Sydney.

"The Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccine roll-out has been carefully planned to protect the community, ensuring that populations such as quarantine, healthcare and aged care workers, as well as aged care residents, are given first priority."

The Academy's statement highlights that Australia has an important role to play in supporting global access to vaccines, particularly across the Indo-Pacific region.

"It is crucial that all countries have timely and affordable access to vaccines, to ensure that the world's most vulnerable individuals can be protected," says Professor Fran Baum, Academy Fellow and a public health expert at Flinders University in Adelaide.

Once the vaccination roll-out is complete, in Australia and internationally, the world will be a significant step closer to reviving major cultural activities, such as mass gatherings and international travel.

Academy President, Professor Ingrid Scheffer, says: "A crucial aspect of the response to COVID-19 has been the incredible response by the world's health and medical research community. At the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 was an unfolding threat of unknown proportions. Today, just over 12 months later, we have a suite of vaccines supported by robust diagnostic tests, evolving evidenced-based public health measures, and steadily improving treatments for severe COVID-19 disease."

"Many hundreds of Australian researchers have contributed to every aspect of the fight against COVID-19: helping to stop its spread through public health measures, improving treatments, developing vaccines, supporting informed communication and reducing the social effects on disrupted families and communities."

The statement, report and further comments are available at <https://aahms.org/news/covid-19-vaccine-roll-out/>

Stand-alone quotes

Professor Tania Sorrell, Academy Fellow and University of Sydney infectious diseases researcher

New level of protection

"The vaccines being offered in Australia will provide a new level of protection for our community. Now we have the tools to help save lives and reduce the social and economic impact of the pandemic. However, ongoing research will remain crucial as the pandemic continues – as we seek to understand how well vaccines are preventing viral transmission and illness, how long they provide protection, and how they can be improved."

Professor Brendan Crabb, Academy Fellow, Director of Melbourne's Burnet Institute

Maintain public health measures

"Vaccinating our population, and that of the rest of the world, will take quite a bit of time, so it is critical that for the foreseeable future we continue to use public health measures, including physical distancing, hand hygiene, the judicious use of face masks, good ventilation and effective controls at international borders."

Professor Tony Cunningham, Academy Fellow and an infectious diseases expert at the University of Sydney

A full review

"The vaccines have been subject to a full, not emergency, review by TGA. We also have the phase 3 trial data and ongoing surveillance by regulatory agencies in the UK and Israel and Europe on the way."

“The Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccine rollout has been carefully planned to protect the community, ensuring that populations such as quarantine, healthcare and aged care workers, as well as aged care residents, are given first priority. Follow up post rollout is being carefully planned in Australia.”

Effective vaccinations

The higher efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine of greater than 80% with a 12 week interdose interval is very encouraging and recommended by TGA. Both vaccines appear to be effective in the latest figures from Israel and the UK although these are preliminary and may be partly due to lockdown effects.”

“The reduced efficacy of two vaccines against the South African strain has been shown in small trials but all companies with vaccines on the market are moving swiftly to produce second generation vaccines or boosters, as we do with influenza annually; Australian quarantine has been successful in preventing spread into the community.”

Fran Baum, Academy Fellow and a public health expert at Flinders University in Adelaide

Vaccine equity

“It is crucial that all countries have timely and affordable access to vaccines, to ensure that the world’s most vulnerable individuals can be protected.

“This particularly includes health workers. Indeed, it is incredibly important to ensure that health workers around the globe are vaccinated, as recently highlighted by WHO Director General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who has stressed that vaccine equity protects people everywhere and strengthens the international community’s ability to stop COVID-19.”

Professor Kirsten McCaffery, Academy Fellow, health literacy researcher, University of Sydney

Communication and vaccine hesitancy

The roll out of the vaccine is a crucial time to get public communication and messaging right. We want clear consistent messages from government, health professionals and opinion leaders. Messaging needs to be appropriate for diverse audiences and be inclusive of people with lower health literacy and from different cultural and language groups who sometimes get forgotten.

We need broad messaging but also targeted messages for key groups who may be more hesitant, and we need to use social media as well as mainstream media channels.

Being respectful of people who feel uncertain about the vaccine will be important as well as being responsive to their questions and needs. Health professionals have an important role here. We must also encourage people to carefully consider the source and credibility of their health information and how it applies in Australia.

There is a risk of over focusing on a small minority who are strongly opposed to vaccination. This is a time for the community to come together and recognise the remarkable achievement of the vaccines that will help us get back our lives to a better normal.

Professor Caroline Homer, Academy Fellow, Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health researcher at the Burnet Institute in Melbourne

Vaccination and pregnancy

“There are no concerns about the vaccine’s safety in breastfeeding women or their babies. This means that breastfeeding women can receive the vaccine at any time and do not need to stop feeding before or after.”

“Vaccination during pregnancy is not currently recommended for all women. However, pregnant women who have medical risk factors for severe COVID-19 should consider being vaccinated. Women need to have this discussion with their health provider and weigh up the potential benefits of vaccination outweigh any potential risks. The guidance from the Australian Government and from RANZCOG will be helpful for each woman to make that decision.”

Academy President, Professor Ingrid Scheffer, University of Melbourne

A global achievement

“We have seen an incredible response to the pandemic by the world’s health and medical research community. At the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 was an unfolding threat of unknown proportions. Today, just over 12 months later, we have a suite of vaccines supported by robust diagnostic tests, public health measures, and steadily improving treatments for severe COVID-19 disease.

“Many hundreds of Australian researchers have contributed to every aspect of the fight against COVID-19: helping to stop its spread through evolving evidence-based public health measures, improving treatments, developing vaccines, supporting informed communication and reducing the social effects on disrupted families and communities.”