



Scotch Plains-Fanwood Doctors Give Their Expert Opinions on the COVID Vaccines

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January 8, 2021 at 12:08 AM

NEW JERSEY -- New Jersey has begun its program for administering the COVID-19 vaccine in a two-phase approach. Stage 1A provides vaccine access to healthcare workers and residents of long-term care facilities. The overall goal is to have the vaccine reach a majority of the population by the spring, according to the NJ Office of Emergency Medical Services. However, some people have expressed concerns about the vaccines developed by Pfizer and Moderna.

TAPinto Scotch Plains-Fanwood contacted several local doctors, who weighed in with their thoughts about the vaccine and how it will change the dynamic of the state and country. The physicians included Howard Kornfeld, MD, FAAP; Michael C. Bachman, MD, MBA; Sharon L. Filler, MD, F.A.A.P.; and Ryan Housam, MD, F.A.A.P.



You received the COVID vaccine shot recently. Were you nervous about getting it?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: Not at all. I was grateful to receive it as an important step to protect myself and my community.

Dr. Michael Bachman: No, I was eager to get the vaccine and see it as an exciting sign that there is a light at the end of the tunnel of this pandemic.

Dr. Sharon Filler: No, I would have gotten it on the first day offered. I was more anxious waiting my turn.

Dr. Ryan Housam: I'm actually scheduled to receive my first dose this weekend. I'm more excited than anything else. I finally have the chance to do something about COVID19.

Do you have to get a booster shot? If yes, when?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: Yes, it comes four weeks after the initial Moderna vaccine. My next dose is on January 19th.

Dr. Michael Bachman: I received the Moderna vaccine, so I will get a second dose in 4 weeks. While the first dose triggers the desired immune response, it essentially primes the pump. A second dose is required to achieve better efficacy and a stronger immune response.

Dr. Sharon Filler: My booster shot is scheduled for January 24th.

Dr. Ryan Housam: Yes. With the Pfizer vaccine, the booster is three weeks later. With the Moderna vaccine, the second dose in four weeks later.

Why was it important for you to get the vaccine?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: It was important for me to be protected so that I can take care of my patients without worry that I can get sick and bring the illness home to my family. It was also important to me to be a good example to my staff, friends, and patients and show that it is safe and effective.

Dr. Michael Bachman: Getting the vaccine is an important step to ending this pandemic, protecting my family and community.

Dr. Sharon Filler: It was important for me to not only protect myself but protect my patients, my family and my parents. I am always afraid I will be bringing COVID home to my children and husband and change out of my scrubs in the garage not to contaminate my house. This will protect them. As for my parents, we only see them outside to decrease the risk and can't wait to hug them again!

Dr. Ryan Housam: It is the only way to regain some normalcy in our lives. Like everyone else, I'm tired of keeping away from family and friends. I'm tired of limiting my children's social circle. I am ready to see my parents again, who live out of state. More importantly, I'm tired of watching people die. The only way out of this is through vaccination, and we all need to do our part.

Is the vaccine key to opening up schools again?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: Yes, I believe the vaccine is an important step to safely open up schools, our economy and resume a semblance of life as we knew it.

Dr. Michael Bachman: Children will be offered the vaccine in the last phase of distribution. Adults at higher risk that work in schools can be vaccinated sooner and protected and this will make the re-opening of schools safer. However, with proper procedures in place, schools may be able to open even before widespread vaccination.

Dr. Sharon Filler: The vaccine will help with opening up schools by having the teachers get vaccinated. Right now, Pfizer is approved for 16 years and up, so we will have to wait on vaccinating the younger kids at this point.

Dr. Ryan Housam: Yes. I read an interesting article from *The Atlantic* today. The biggest issue now seems to be staffing shortages due to exposures and illness. Imagine how much safer the teachers would feel and how much more stability there would be in the type of education our children receive if we could vaccinate the teachers and staff.

Many people have expressed fear that the vaccine was "rushed" and they say they will refuse to take it. What do you think of this mindset? Is it harmful to themselves and everyone else?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: The mRNA vaccine technology started about 10 years ago when the first SARS virus occurred. When that happened, the virus never spread and that vaccine was not needed. That technology was used to create this vaccine. That is why it was able to be developed so quickly. Science had done it before, and it only needed to be adjusted to this new coronavirus. We need to trust science and put our "faith" in the right places. Facts and the fiction of fear is not a dichotomy of equal weight.

Dr. Michael Bachman: The vaccine was developed in record time, but this was achieved using better science than was available for prior vaccine development. The mRNA technology has been used for years in cancer treatment, so the technology is not brand new. The combination of private sector ingenuity, government funding and support from the medical community allowed for the rapid development. No shortcuts were taken in the trial process. With previous vaccines, any long-term side effects were identified in first in six weeks. It's been five months since Phase Three trials began, no long-term side effects. While it is understandable for people to have fears and confusion, the science behind the vaccine and the rigorous approval process should calm these concerns.

Dr. Sharon Filler: I do not think the vaccine was rushed. We have never had this many smart scientists working on the same goal and collaborating together. In addition, the mRNA vaccines have been being studied for years so this has helped with the process as well. We can't compare this vaccine to polio because the technology we have is much improved than in that era. It is crucial that we vaccinated as many as we can. There will be some people who can't get vaccinated due to allergies or being immunocompromised so it is important that everyone else who can get vaccinated get their vaccines, so we can reach herd immunity and protect all!

Dr. Ryan Housam: I initially had concerns about the speed at which the vaccines were released. However, I have since done a LOT of reading and talking to people much smarter than me. The technique used to make the vaccines has been studied for years now (since the SARS scare). Science is often a process of building and improving on what has already been done. These vaccine techniques did not come out of thin air in the last year. It's based off of years of hard work by really smart scientists. It's time to trust the experts.

How important is it for parents of young children to get the vaccine?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: Parents need to be well to take care of children.

Dr. Michael Bachman: The general public will likely be offered the vaccine by this spring/summer, and it is important for parents to get the vaccine. This will help protect them and their families.

Dr. Sharon Filler: It is extremely important for parents of young kids to get vaccinated. Most cases of MIS-C have been found to be derived from the parents having COVID initially. In addition, children can be at risk of myocarditis so it is important they are protected by their parents since the vaccine is not approved for under 16 years at this time.

Dr. Ryan Housam: Children are not eligible (yet) for the vaccine. In order to protect this vulnerable population, I would encourage adults to get vaccinated as soon as if it is available to them.

Is the vaccine free to receive?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: In keeping with the CARES Act, no patient will be charged for the vaccine or its administration. The federal government will provide the vaccine itself, and the health care providers who administer the vaccine will be reimbursed by the patient's insurance. You will still need to present your insurance card at your appointments..

Dr. Michael Bachman: Yes, the federal government is covering the cost of the vaccine administration.

Dr. Sharon Filler: The vaccine should be covered by your current insurance.

Dr. Ryan Housam: My understanding is that it has been paid for by the government, and administration fees can be charged to insurance companies. I do not know this for sure.

Do you have any idea how long the immunity lasts?

Dr. Howard Kornfeld: Scientists and researchers are studying this. What I can say is that the vaccine activates T cell immunity as well as B cell immunity (which creates antibodies) and should last several years.

Dr. Michael Bachman: After the first shot, you are about 50% protected. One week after the 2nd shot, you are about 95% protected. The protection will likely last 6 months or more. We need more research over time and are hopeful immunity may last longer based on new studies showing a slow rate of decline for immune cells. Some survivors of original SARS outbreak (also caused by a coronavirus) still have immune cells 17 years later.

Dr. Sharon Filler: After your second vaccine, you should have immunity as early as two weeks.

Dr. Ryan Housam: We do not know yet. As more people are vaccinated, the scientists will be able to answer that with time.