

COVID-19 vaccines and breast cancer: what you need to know

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Breast cancer still remains the leading cause of cancer-related death in Bahamian women. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a serious impact in The Bahamas, including breast cancer patients, their families and caregivers.

There are three leading vaccines now available in The Bahamas to help protect against COVID-19. These vaccines are used to help the immune system of a person recognize and protect his/her body against the COVID-19 infection. In this article, we'll discuss some of the questions women with breast cancer (or a history of cancer) may have about the COVID-19 vaccines.

Are COVID-19 vaccines safe for breast cancer patients?

Current data indicate that all the leading vaccines are safe for cancer patients as none of them contain the live virus, which can cause serious side effects in immunocompromised patients undergoing cancer treatments. Talk to your doctor about any concerns before getting vaccinated.

Can you still get COVID-19 after you are fully vaccinated?

Yes. No vaccine is 100 percent effective. These cases are called breakthrough infections. However, in such cases, you are significantly protected against severe illness and death. It is very important to follow the COVID protocols even after vaccination until significant herd immunity is achieved.

Are these vaccines equally effective for breast cancer patients?

Cancer treatments, like radiation and chemotherapy, weaken the body's immune system. For that reason, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned that the vaccines may not offer full protection in such patients, making them susceptible to breakthrough infections.

Still, some protection is always better than no protection.

Also, because breast cancer patients may be at increased risk of breakthrough infections, their family and friends should consider vaccination in order to protect

themselves.

Should cancer patients receive booster shots?

The CDC has recently recommended a third dose (booster) of COVID-19 vaccines for cancer patients who are immunocompromised to boost their immune response. However, it is important to note that not all breast cancer patients are immunocompromised, even if they are under cancer treatment. Talk to your doctor and find out if you will benefit from a third dose.

Should you delay your mammogram because one of the COVID-19 vaccine side effects could cause swollen lymph glands under your arm?

The swelling of the lymph glands under your arm or lymphadenopathy could be a sign of breast cancer or infection on your mammogram. This condition has been reported in few cases with the COVID-19 vaccines currently available and tends to be more common than with other

vaccines. Although it is temporary and resolves by itself in most, it may interfere with the mammogram results. As a result, the Society of Breast Imaging now recommends that women schedule their annual mammogram prior to the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine or about four to six weeks after the second dose.

However, it is not recommended that women skip their annual screenings because of their COVID-19 vaccine status. Annual screening with mammograms is still a very important tool for early diagnosis. Discuss with your doctor before delaying your mammogram.

How else will the COVID-19 vaccines help breast cancer patients?

In addition to saving lives and easing the burden of the pandemic in the country, these vaccines also protect cancer patients and others vulnerable through development of herd immunity. They also prevent severe illness in cancer patients. It is also hoped that vaccines in turn will encourage the women to get their annual mammograms, which is a critical tool for early cancer detection. Experts recommend that most people with breast cancer or a history of cancer should get a COVID-19 vaccine. Talk to your doctor about your individual situation and concerns. Let us join together in the fight to defeat breast cancer as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

