**How We Can Fight Back Against COVID-19**

**May 5, 2021**

**Transcript**

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Anthony Vieira:

You’re listening to the Get to Know TRICARE Podcast: your resource for information to help you get the most out of your TRICARE benefit.

Hi. Thank you for tuning into this special COVID-19 edition of “Get to Know TRICARE.” I’m Anthony Vieira from the TRICARE team. I want to begin by saying “thank you” to all of the health care professionals—both in and outside of the Department of Defense—for the great work they’ve been doing to combat the COVID-19 crisis over the last year.

That fight isn’t over yet. But we’ve seen tremendous progress made with vaccines, and really educating people on how to protect themselves and slow the spread of COVID-19.

Someone who’s been doing an excellent job of spreading the word across the DoD is Air Force Col. Jennifer Garrison. She’s the Department of Defense’s Operation Planning Team Lead for the DoD COVID-19 Vaccine Program.

You may recognize her from the DHA COVID-19 town halls with Military OneSource. You can also catch these live stream on the TRICARE Newsroom. She’s our guest on the program today.

Col. Garrison, it’s great to have you on. Thank you for being here, ma’am.

Col. Garrison:

Thank you, Anthony, for having me.

Anthony Vieira:

Of course. So, let’s talk about COVID-19 vaccines. They’re one of the biggest things on people’s minds and rightfully so. As of today, there are multiple COVID-19 vaccines approved and recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Can you talk to me about some of the benefits of getting a COVID-19 vaccine?

Col. Garrison:

So, the CDC says COVID-19 vaccines are an effective tool to end the pandemic and help us get back to normal. The COVID-19 vaccines are extremely safe and effective. It truly helps your body's immunity to help fight the virus. It also reduces your risk of getting COVID-19 or becoming seriously ill, if you do get COVID-19.

As of now, the CDC recommends that you still wear a mask once vaccinated and practice social distancing. Of course, this protects those around you as well—especially people at high risk for the severe illness.

Anthony Vieira:

That’s a great point you just brought up, Col. Garrison. We hear a lot from the CDC about those who may be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Who exactly are these individuals? Who’s considered to be at higher risk?

Col. Garrison:

So, that is a great question, Anthony. So, currently the CDC has identified several groups who are at higher risk of severe illness if they get the COVID disease. These include older adults, especially those over 65. Those who have medical conditions, who may become severely ill if they develop COVID-19, and may need hospitalization, intensive care, or ventilators to help them breathe.

Those who are pregnant, although the overall risk of severe illness is low, pregnant people are at an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19 when compared to non-pregnant people. So, that's what the CDC messaging has been to us.

Anthony Vieira:

When you think of ventilators and you think of hospitalization, it really is a stark reminder that we all have a role to play in slowing the spread of this virus. We have to make sure that we’re doing our part. And that brings me to the next topic: attitudes about the vaccines. You know, I think the vast majority of people understand that these vaccines are safe and effective. But there are some differing opinions on this.

There are those who say, “Hey, I’ve already had COVID-19. Why do I need to get the vaccine?” And then, there are others, maybe family or friends, who have questions about the vaccine safety. What would you say to them?

Col Garrison:

So, we try to display a positive message. Of course, we want everyone to get shots in arms. Everyone should get vaccinated. For those who were previously diagnosed with COVID-19 and recovered, the immune response, including the duration of immunity, is not yet understood.

So, vaccines are the best way to reduce the risk of hospitalizations or death due to the virus. Vaccines are safe and effective. None of the FDA authorized vaccines contain the live virus that causes COVID-19. So, I just want to say shots in arms as quickly as possible.

Anthony Vieira:

Yes, absolutely. So, I’d like to go back to something you just mentioned about COVID-19 vaccines not containing the live virus. This means you cannot get sick with COVID-19 when you get vaccinated, right?

Col. Garrison:

That is a wonderful question, Anthony. So, you can't get sick with COVID-19 from taking a COVID-19 vaccine. However, many people have limited side effects from the vaccine. So, side effects include fever, headache, chills, tiredness, muscle pain, or discomfort after a dose. So, these side effects are normal signs your body is building protection and should go away after a few days.

The FDA-authorized vaccines have gone through the same safety processes as other vaccines and undergo continuous monitoring. And with more than 230 million FDA-authorized doses administered to date, adverse side effects are still rare. For those who have questions about the vaccine, we recommend discussing your concerns with your physician.

Anthony Vieira:

That’s a great point, Col. Garrison. Everyone should talk to their doctor if they have questions or concerns about getting the COVID-19 vaccine.

Now, let’s talk about the big news regarding eligibility. As of April 19 all eligible and authorized TRICARE beneficiaries can make an appointment to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Pretty significant development if you’re a service member, family member, or retiree.

Col. Garrison:

Yes, it is Anthony. So, right now all beneficiaries and those authorized to receive the COVID vaccine from DoD can book a COVID-19 vaccine appointment. This coincides with President Biden’s announcement about eligibility. Sites include military hospitals, clinics, and DoD vaccination sites. And more appointments will open up as vaccine supply increases. So, as folks can get their COVID-19 shots, my advice to them is get them quickly. Shots in arm so we can get back to normal as quickly as possible.

Military hospitals and clinics are certainly doing their best to make appointments available for everyone and get us back to normalcy.

So, make sure you **TRICARE.mil/vaccineappointments** to learn about vaccine appointment tools and DoD vaccination locations where you live.

Now, turning back to you, Col. Garrison. Can you highlight some of the online tools that make it easier to book COVID-19 vaccine appointments?

Col. Garrison:

Absolutely, Anthony. So, folks can -- they're able to book an appointment at a military hospital, clinic, or a DoD vaccination site using one of DHA’s patient portals. These portals include MHS genesis and TRICARE Online. Another online tool to help you book an appointment is the new DHA Appointing Portal or DAP. These tools are easy to use from your computer or mobile device. So, we truly try to make it really friendly for the user.

Not all DoD vaccination sites use the same appointment tools. So, please keep that in mind. But you can go to **TRICARE.mil/vaccineappointments** tosee what appointment tools many locations are using.

Anthony Vieira:

Excellent and remember if you don't see your location listed, you can check with your local military hospital or clinic or DoD vaccination site to learn about their vaccination process. And, Col. Garrison, we'd be remiss if we didn't mention that vaccination options outside of the DoD exist as well. So, you know, you may be able to book a COVID-19 appointment through your civilian provider, pharmacies participating in the Federal Retail Pharmacy Program, or through state or local run vaccination sites.

And, you know, you don't need a referral to receive the vaccine in the civilian sector, even if you're an active duty service member. Also, the COVID-19 vaccine is free. But there may be a cost based on your health plan for an office visit, or if you need follow on care. So, make sure you talk to your TRICARE contractor if you have any questions about that.

Now, Col. Garrison, let’s talk about being fully vaccinated. What are some important things listeners should know once they’re fully vaccinated?

Col Garrison:

That's a great question, Anthony. So, it typically takes about two weeks after you're fully vaccinated for your body to build protection -- your immunity against the virus that causes COVID-19. The CDC says fully vaccinated people can start to do some things that they had stopped doing because of the pandemic. So, for example, you can gather indoors with other people who are fully vaccinated.

And fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear a mask outdoors, except in certain crowded settings and venues, But, as of today, continue to take precautions in public.

Wear a mask, stay six feet apart from others, avoid crowds and poorly ventilated spaces, and wash your hands often. Please keep track of any changes to this guidance issued by the CDC because they're frequently updating their website and it's a great source to go to.

Anthony Vieira:

To that point, I had a quick question. I'm actually celebrating my birthday today --

Col Garrison:

Woo-hoo!

[laughter]

Anthony Vieira:

-- and I’m sure someone listening right now is celebrating their birthday or they have one coming up. So here's a scenario: what if a family member wants to go to a restaurant -- an outdoor restaurant and dine unmasked with, say, two or three friends who are also fully vaccinated. That's perfectly OK to do, right?

Col Garrison:

Correct.

Anthony Vieira:

OK. Just had the check [laughs].

Col. Garrison:

I just want to say happy birthday, because I know you're probably 21. So, happy birthday

Anthony Vieira:

Thank you very much, Col. Garrison.

This has been a really excellent discussion about COVID-19 vaccines and everything that service members and their families need to do. Before we wrap up, is there anything that you'd like to share?

Col. Garrison:

No, I just want to say thank you for allowing me to come on and be able to talk about this. I know there's some hesitancy out there and we're developing great messaging across the enterprise to help people feel comfortable about getting the vaccine. We definitely don't want them to feel peer pressured to get it. But feel comfortable about understanding the reasons of why becoming vaccinated is so important—so we can get back to normalcy across the nation.

Anthony Vieira:

Excellent and thanks so much for everything that you and your team are doing to save lives. It's really making an impact.

Col. Garrison:

Aww, thank you so much. I have an outstanding team between the services, the combatant commands, and joint staff. We also could not do that without with our DoD population that are eligible to get the vaccine. So, I just want to say thank you for everybody doing their part.

Anthony Vieira:

Excellent. Thanks again for being here.

That’s it for today’s special edition of “Get to Know TRICARE.” Use the hashtag #TRICAREpodcast if you’d like to join the discussion. For more on vaccine safety and the latest news, go to **TRICARE.mil/covidvaccine**. To see what vaccine appointment tools your military hospital or clinic is using, go to **TRICARE.mil/vaccineappointments**.

For the “Get to Know TRICARE” podcast, I’m Anthony Vieira.

Thanks for listening. We’ll be back with another edition of the Get to Know TRICARE Podcast soon. For the latest TRICARE news, be sure to visit our website at **www.tricare.mil**. And don’t forget to contact your TRICARE contractor or local military hospital or clinic if you have questions or need assistance.

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