

Veteran's Health Equity Podcast Transcript

COVID-19, Vaccination, and Women Veterans

>> I want to welcome everyone and thank you all for joining. My name is Lauren Korshak and I lead translation activities for the V.A.'s Office of Health Equity. The Office of Health Equity champions the advancement of health equity and the reduction of highlight disparities in veterans.

Today on the Health Equity and Veterans podcast series, we'll be discussing some misconceptions about COVID-19 infection and COVID-19 vaccinations that are especially important to veterans. But before we begin I want to go ahead and introduce our speakers.

Dr. Alicia Christy is an Obstetrician Gynecologist and Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility doctor and the Deputy Director of Reproductive Health in the Office of Women's Health. She is also an Army veteran.

And Dr. Chelsea Cosby is a Primary Care Physician and the Deputy Director of Comprehensive Health in the Office of Women's Health, at Veterans Health Administration.

So as we begin, I want to open to ask you all, why should women veterans still be concerned about avoiding COVID-19? The newer variants are supposed to be mild, so is it still important to mask and get vaccinated?

>> Thanks so much for having us on Lauren and I'm going to start off. Thanks for listening everyone, I'm Dr. Chelsea Cosby. And you know, right now we have the Omicron variant and even though this infection is milder than previous variants, the Omicron variant of COVID is still a pretty dangerous infection.

We know that people who are vaccinated have better protection and the unvaccinated people are more likely to be hospitalized or die, even as the pandemic is slowing down, you know, we're seeing these trends. Throughout the pandemic across multiple variants, we're seeing those who are vaccinated have the best chance of having a positive outcome, even if they do get infected.

If you go to the V.A. and the CDC website, that's probably the best place to find up-to-date information on statistics on how much these vaccines can protect you, because this may change as, you know, we go through the pandemic. But that's going to be a great place to find those up-to-date numbers. The daily numbers show that infections are decreasing and that's great news, but thousands of Americans are still dying from COVID-19.

So, you know, when we were preparing this podcast March 9th of 2022, we see about 8400 individuals dying per day of COVID, according to the CDC. This infection is important to avoid because even though many people feel mild symptoms, thousands are needing health care and that includes hospitalizations, emergency room visits, nursing home care. Caring for your loved ones in your community mean that we need to protect our resources. So we need to make sure these resources are available for other emergencies and we need to strive to be good stewards of our health care system.

So by getting vaccinated it would help protect others who are high risk of poor outcomes and that includes older relatives, immunocompromised family members and a lot of people are around children that are too young to get vaccinated. And you know, when we think about the science, every time

someone catches the virus it has the opportunity to change a little bit. So right now the current variant is mild, but it could evolve to a more serious infection, like some of those earlier variants. And so by stopping or slowing down these new infections, that's going to lower the chance for the virus to create new variants.

>> This is Alicia Christy and I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to talk to veterans about that extremely important topic. And I'd like to thank Dr. Cosby for her comments. I'd also like to add, that there are also risks for developing long COVID-19. People who have a mild infection are still at risk for developing long-term effects, even after the initial infection has gone away.

Physicians are still learning how to best treat people who develop these symptoms and often these conditions will have a significant long-term effect on the individual's life. Therefore, it's really important to continue masking, to continue protecting yourself, to get vaccinated, to receive the booster if that's recommended for you.

And I also wanted to mention that V.A. has access to all the approved treatments for COVID-19 and we have health care providers who are dedicated to keeping the organization up-to-date about treatments and recommendations. I also wanted to take a little time to mention materials that we've developed in our office, fact sheets that address COVID-19 myths, particularly as it relates to reproductive health. And I wanted to make certain that I mention that it's important for pregnant veterans to be vaccinated and that it is not true that vaccination affects fertility and concerns about fertility should not be a reason to not get vaccinated.

>> So, continuing along those lines, can you provide more details about why women veterans should get vaccinated and what are the benefits for women veterans to get a COVID vaccination?

>> Well I'd like to first mention that for reproductive aged women, pregnancy puts them in a high risk group for COVID-19. There's growing evidence that the COVID-19 vaccination can protect not only the veteran, but also their baby from COVID-19.

Unfortunately, pregnant women are one of the least vaccinated populations and it's often because they're concerned about harming their unborn child. And actually the vaccination protects not only them, but their baby. And that protection can last after birth, into the early months. So I would encourage veterans who are pregnant, that they should get vaccination. Because if you are pregnant and get COVID-19, you're more likely to be hospitalized, more likely to be admitted to the intensive care unit, more likely to be intubated or need a breathing tube, and more likely to die if you're not vaccinated.

There's also risk for the baby. The baby's more likely to be born prematurely and more likely to die if you're not vaccinated. We also have information on the V.A. website and on our website, about the importance of getting vaccinated if you are pregnant and if you are attempting to get pregnant. There's increasingly more evidence that vaccines are safe in pregnancy.

Initially some providers may have been hesitant to recommend the vaccine because there wasn't a lot of data. But now there's published research from around the world that shows that vaccination in pregnant women is safe, both in women who were vaccinated before they were pregnant and women who were vaccinated while they were pregnant. And the vaccine has been proven to be safe in over 200,000 women based on data that's collected by the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control.

And again, I'd like to mention that there are a lot of myths surrounding vaccination in pregnancy and vaccination for those individuals that are attempting to get pregnant. It does not affect fertility and it does protect both mother and baby.

>> So, now that you all have gone over why it's really important for women veterans to get a COVID-19 vaccination, I'm hoping you can help discuss some of the factors or barriers that often prevent women from getting vaccinated. And one of the things that I wanted to ask first about, are some of the short-term side effects of the COVID vaccine that women are particularly concerned about? Dr. Cosby, can you help go over some of those?

>> When people experience side effects from the COVID vaccine, usually those side effects are symptoms of their immune system interacting with the vaccine in the first few days after the shot. So that can include things like tiredness, headaches, muscle pain, fever and chills. And those can happen in a very mild way or they can happen in a more intense way.

You could also have side effects that are just in the area of the shot. So that could be redness, swelling or pain. So if someone is experiencing very intense, severe, long-lasting side effects, that's when you need to reach out to either the vaccine health care provider or to your primary care provider. But if those are short-lived and not very severe, you usually should be fine in a matter of days.

>> Dr. Christy, does the COVID-19 vaccine affect periods?

>> A question that we sometimes get from reproductive aged women is, "will the vaccine affect my period?" And the answer is, yes it may affect the period, but those changes are mild and they're short-term, it does not affect your long-term fertility. It doesn't create long-term changes in hormones and so it is very mild and it is also short-term.

I'd also like to discuss a little bit about some additional barriers, particularly for women of color. And oftentimes because women of color have had negative experience in the health care system, they may have a mistrust of the health care system. And it's important to remember that generations of people of color have had negative interactions with health care. And that might include being overlooked, mistreated, and they also are well aware of the history of African Americans being used in experiments, such as the Tuskegee experiment. And we want all veterans to know that we are taking additional steps to ensure that we are not overlooking communities of color and the V.A. has been dedicated to bringing testing and vaccination to all communities.

We also know that communities of color have more barriers to preventing COVID-19 infection. Within many minority communities there are high rates of conditions such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes and other chronic diseases that can make COVID-19 a more deadly infection. Many people of color are living in areas that are highly populated and many people share small spaces.

This makes it difficult to socially distance and makes infection more likely to spread. Keeping this in mind, we strongly encourage women from these communities to get vaccinated from COVID-19. Also, if you're caring for an elderly person or a child or someone who is immunosuppressed or who has a chronic illness, it's important for you to get protected in order to protect them.

It's also important to get information from reliable sources and that's often not social media sites. You can always go to your health care provider for trusted information about COVID-19 and they are able to answer your individual, personalized questions about the virus.

V.A. knows that veterans in V.A. can be trusted to provide truthful information. The V.A. has information on its website and we also recommend the CDC as an important source of good information about COVID-19. There's also a blog related to this podcast, where you can find links to these sites. V.A. provides resources and there are other reliable resources outside of V.A. For instance, the CDC and the National Institutes of Health or NIH.

Social media can be a very powerful tool to help others that you care about, but it can also be a source of misinformation. Make certain that you double-check what you hear with doctors, experts, and reliable organizations. You want to make certain that you're getting information from experts and that includes not only information about vaccination, but also information about treatment.

>> And so as we close I have one final question, if veterans are interested in getting vaccinated for COVID-19, what can they do?

>> Well, the V.A. has as I mentioned, a lot of very valuable resources and one is the V.A. Insider COVID-19 page. And there you can find information about how to get vaccinated, what are recommended treatments, how to protect yourself from infection.

>> And I also would like to add that we should be sure to reach out to your primary care providers, people have a PACT team or Patient Aligned Care Team, and also you would have an RN Care Manager as a part of that team and that person is always available to discuss any concerns that you may have about whether or not you need the vaccine now or when your next booster would be and how to go about getting those things.

>> Fantastic, thank you, Dr. Christy, thank you, Dr. Cosby, for sharing all this really important information. And I want to thank everyone who listened in and I hope you all will join us on our next episode.

Take care.