

## BOHS Advisory Note on Vaccination in the Workplace

### Introduction

The exceptional speed of the development and roll-out of COVID-19 vaccinations is an extraordinary scientific achievement in the protection of the general public and workers. At the time of writing (February 2021) there are some concerns over the effectiveness of the vaccines in preventing infection from some variants, however current indications suggest satisfactory protection and few indications of any risk to health.

As care homes hit the government's target of occupants being offered or having the vaccines administered, employers may be wishing to clarify the impact of vaccines on their risk assessments and how they should factor in vaccine uptake into the protection of workers. For this reason, BOHS has issued this INTERIM advice. The BOHS COVID-19 expert group will keep this information under review and issue advisory notes as the science progresses.

### The role of vaccines in protecting workers

Vaccination is likely to reduce the impact of transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace because of the potential to reduce the number of people contracting the disease. Evidence so far indicates that it also reduces the severity of symptoms and may also reduce the potential for an individual to spread the disease.

The HSE advise that according to the COSHH hierarchy of control measures, vaccination as protection against infection at work is the last line of defence and other controls should be available. (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/blood-borne-viruses/immunisation.htm>).

As with all control measures, immunisation needs to be checked and reviewed and boosters provided where deemed necessary. In the case of Covid 19, boosters will undoubtedly be required.

### Can you rely on vaccination as a control measure in the workplace?

In planning for the future, employers will wish to consider:

- 1) Whether widespread vaccination of a workforce amounts to an effective control of risk so as to reduce the need for other forms of personal protection;
- 2) What considerations need to be in place where there is a systematic roll-out of vaccination in the workplace (eg; in healthcare) in order to protect other workers.

This advice addresses the first point given our current state of knowledge. On the second point, many of the administrative and data considerations in place for testing, outlined in the government's guidance will be applicable. However, there are additional risks and complications with vaccine roll-out in a workplace and we await further clarification from health professional bodies.

On the first point, the following should be considered:

- 1) Indications of the effectiveness of vaccines are variable.
- 2) The effectiveness of the vaccine for each individual cannot be known.
- 3) Insufficient data exists about the effectiveness across different groups.
- 4) There is variable uptake of vaccine across different groups.
- 5) The position of pregnant workers and the COVID-19 vaccine means that, for the foreseeable future, vaccination should not be taken as a substitute control measure for other effective measures.
  - Pregnant and recently pregnant workers cannot benefit from the vaccine at present. Strategies of infection control, based around the widespread use of vaccines as a control measure need to take account of this. Where other effective control measures are available, such as the use of remote working, any reliance on vaccination as an alternative may amount to unlawful discrimination.

## Conclusion

While vaccines may constitute additional personal protection, a precautionary approach must continue to be taken.

While there is optimism about the future role of vaccination in workplace risk control, for the time being we cannot rely on vaccination as a workplace control measure for Covid 19. Until there is better understanding of the science other control measures cannot be relaxed.

As stated elsewhere, the BOHS COVID-19 expert group will keep this information under review and issue advisory notes as the science progresses.

## References:

- [Guidance for employers and businesses on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) on COVID-19 protective measures in the workplace.
- [Guidance on local restriction tiers.](#)
- Referring staff to NHS Test and Trace, which offers testing to anyone with [COVID-19 symptoms](#). A virus test can be booked via the [NHS website for anyone with symptoms](#), see information on [which employees are eligible](#).
- Supporting staff to self-isolate if they or a household member have symptoms of, or have tested positive for, COVID-19 or if they are advised to do so by [NHS Test and Trace](#).
- Following the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) [guidance on member of staff safety and conducting risk assessments](#).