

COVID-19

Vaccines are one way to gain immunity from a virus. They have various origins, traditionally relying on a weakened or harmless form of the targeted pathogen. More recently, molecular technology, thanks to advances in genetics, can provide the effect of vaccination without using the pathogen itself.

Some vaccines are developed (and tested) using animal cells. Some use human cells taken from ethically-acquired umbilical cord or placental tissue. Others, as noted, do not involve the use of cells at all, but rather the synthesis of proteins that have the desired effect. These three origins of vaccines do not carry ethical objections.

By
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Ethical considerations in vaccine creation

A fourth source for vaccines, however, involves cell lines that originated with tissue from two aborted fetuses some 60 years ago. Guidance from the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life in 2005 (updated in 2019) and the 2008 instruction "Dignitatis Personae" from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith address this concern in detail.

In summary, these documents permit the use of such vaccines under a specific set of considerations: the disease and its potential impact on individual and communal health is proportionately grave; there is no alternative vaccine; one does not condone or accept the vaccine specifically because of its tainted origin; and the vaccine in question is sufficiently "causally remote" from the immoral origin.

"Causally remote" here means that the two abortions in question (giving rise to two cell lines) took place in the early 1960s. After the many thousands of generations of cells originating

from that tissue, there are no actual descendant cells that were part of the fetal bodies. Further, the abortion did not take place specifically to develop the vaccine, and abortions are not done today to provide a continual source for these cells; the same cell line is self-perpetuating.

The two vaccines using mRNA technology that have currently shown the most promise for COVID-19 (from Pfizer and Moderna) do not have ethical concerns in their origins. However, both used a morally compromised cell line for one of the confirmatory lab tests of their products, as do other current vaccines available under the emergency-use protocols.

The same ethical considerations apply to both production and testing of vaccines, especially the remote causal distance from the tainted origin of cells and their use today. The Pontifical Academy for Life urges the faithful to pressure companies producing vaccines to create alternatives free of all of these concerns.

In addition, vaccine testing requires appropriate informed consent for human





trials and faces the challenge of testing in a sufficiently broad cross-section of the population to verify efficacy and safety. In a health crisis, the need for speedy vaccine development must be balanced with adequate testing and time to uncover and monitor side effects. One factor in COVID-19 vaccine development is that research into the coronavirus family has been ongoing for decades; while this is a “novel” form from this virus family, it is easier to develop an effective vaccine for this virus than for a completely unknown agent.

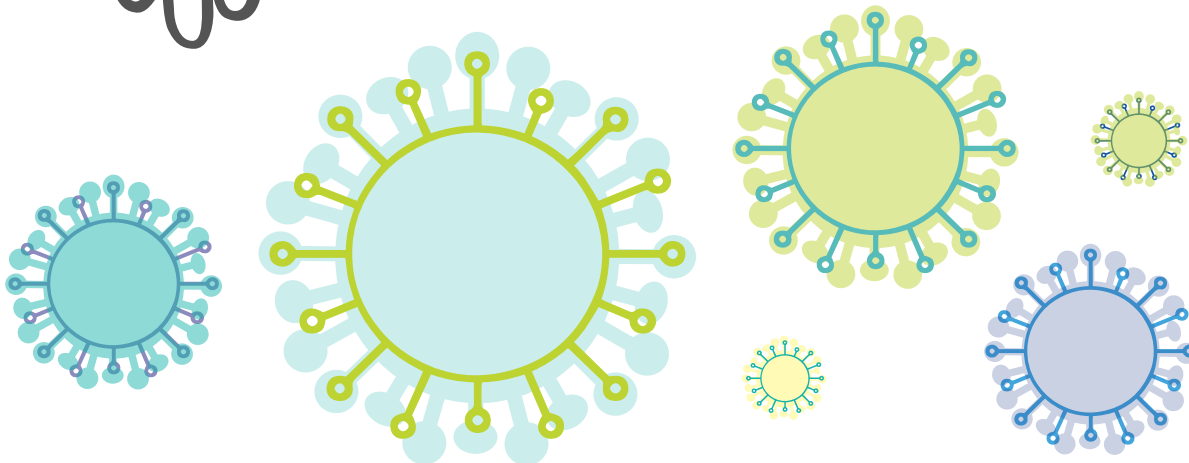
Should a Catholic accept vaccination?

Choosing vaccination is a prudential decision that each must make for oneself and at times for those who depend on one’s decision (for example, children or those lacking decisional capacity due to mental status or disability). This decision must be informed by reliable facts about the vaccine’s origin, safety and efficacy; one’s own risk for infection and the consequences for self and others if sickened; the severity of the illness and the public health crisis; the relative

risk of side effects to the vaccine; availability; cost; and related factors.

While these are serious considerations, the refusal of vaccines may itself involve a degree of moral culpability, depending on the harms that are risked. Those who refuse a vaccine due to general concern about the relation of some vaccines to the use of aborted tissues have a stronger foundation, but this must be fact-based in the context of the actual proposed vaccine. One must be cautious of adopting the same logic rightly criticized in the pro-choice position: that it is my body, and my decision is a private one that is up to my own conscience. While Catholic teaching upholds and values autonomy and self-determination, it also understands that autonomy is not an absolute right but conditioned by the common good.

In the current situation, with a pandemic approaching its one-year anniversary and the widespread social, economic, educational and relational harms we have seen, and a significant portion of the population still at risk, accepting a proven and safe vaccine is justified as a moral good, an act of solidarity and charity and arguably a work of mercy.



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