

Source: The Sunday Times, Page A2
Date: 15 August 2021

Why jabs are critical for those with chronic issues

Mortality rate 10 times higher for Covid-19 patients with underlying heart conditions

Cheryl Tan

Covid-19's death toll here stands at 44, with seven deaths so far this month. All of these fatalities were among unvaccinated people, five of whom had multiple pre-existing conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

As these diseases are highly prevalent among the local population, The Sunday Times looks at why they make people more susceptible to severe Covid-19 infection, and why it is important to get them vaccinated.

Q Why are people with diabetes or cardiac conditions such as hypertension more at risk of severe disease if they were to get Covid-19?

A Professor Tan Huay Cheem, a senior consultant at the Department of Cardiology at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore, said that most of these patients tend to be elderly people who are severely ill with frequent and chronic comorbidities (having more than one chronic condition).

Covid-19 patients with underlying heart conditions are six times more likely to be hospitalised than those without any pre-existing conditions, he said. Their mortality rate is also 10 times higher.

Prof Tan said that hypertension and diabetes are associated with an underlying chronic inflammatory state. If they get Covid-19, they are more likely to experience even more inflammation in the body, which is linked to many Covid-19 complications.

Dr Bee Yong Mong, vice-president of charity organisation Diabetes Singapore, said that those who do not have well-controlled diabetes often have high blood glucose levels, which could inhibit white blood cell functions key to overcoming Covid-19 infection.

Q Why are cancer patients more at risk of developing severe disease, and can all cancer patients get vaccinated?

A Associate Professor Iain Tan, a senior consultant at the Division of Medical Oncology at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS), said that the large majority of cancer patients can receive mRNA Covid-19 vaccinations.

Patients currently on active cancer treatment should consult their oncologists for the optimal timing of the vaccinations in relation to the cancer treatment, he said.

The Ministry of Health had on July 28 relaxed the criteria for severely immunocompromised people, including those undergoing cancer treatment, to be vaccinated. However, certain groups of pa-



People at a Covid-19 vaccination centre last month. Hypertension and diabetes are associated with an underlying chronic inflammatory state, said an expert. If people with such conditions get Covid-19, they are more likely to experience even more inflammation in the body, which is linked to many Covid-19 complications. ST PHOTO: LIM YAQHUI

askST
you ask. we answer.

If you have a question, e-mail us at askst@sph.com.sg

7 deaths so far this month – all unvaccinated

- **Aug 1:** A Ukrainian man, 34, who was a sea crew member who arrived in Singapore on board a vessel. It is not known whether he had any underlying medical conditions.
- **Aug 2:** Singaporean woman, 58, who was a household contact of a case who had visited Samy's Curry restaurant, which has more than 60 cases linked to it. She had no underlying conditions.
- **Aug 4:** Singaporean man, 79, who had a history of heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and hypertension (high blood pressure).
- **Aug 5:** Singaporean man, 63,

who had a history of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidaemia (high cholesterol).

- **Aug 7:** Singaporean woman, 80, who had a history of diabetes, hypertension and atrial fibrillation, a heart condition that causes an irregular and often abnormally fast heart rate.
- **Aug 11:** Singaporean man, 69, who had a history of stroke, diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidaemia.
- **Aug 13:** Singaporean man, 84, who had a history of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidaemia.

Cheryl Tan

Prof Tan from NCCS said cancer patients receiving chemotherapy may produce a reduced antibody response after their first vaccination

dose, but an adequate antibody response is generally achieved after their second dose. "Therefore, it is important for cancer patients to

complete both doses of vaccination to reduce the risk and severity of a Covid-19 infection," he added.

Q Will the vaccine still work if I have these chronic conditions?

A Yes, however, if you are immunocompromised, the effectiveness of the vaccine may be reduced.

Therefore, it is important that you continue to take precautionary measures to prevent infection.

Dr Chng Shih Kiat, medical director at Raffles Medical, said that people with chronic conditions will be recommended to go for the Sinovac vaccine only if they meet the following criteria:

- had a possible allergic reaction or anaphylaxis to a first dose of mRNA vaccine;
- had prior episodes of allergy or anaphylaxis to other vaccines;
- had a transplant within the last three months;
- are on aggressive immunotherapy or are in an immunocompromised state from HIV infection.

tansuwen@sph.com.sg