

To our beloved community,

We hope this letter finds you well. The community has been incredibly supportive of one another this past year and has benefitted from the unified approach to help others with the physical, financial, and mental stresses caused by the pandemic. Initially, masks, social distancing, hand washing, and appropriate quarantine were critical in containing the spread of the virus. However, additional measures are now necessary to return us to “normal” life.

With great *siyata d'shmaya*, scientists developed very safe and highly effective vaccines. These vaccines have been proven to prevent infection in over 90% of the cases. Additionally, in the rare circumstance that a vaccinated person contracts the disease, the vaccine prevents severe illness. As essential workers, the elderly and high-risk individuals have been vaccinated, the vaccine is now available to everyone age 16 years and above.

There are many valid questions in our community regarding the need for the vaccine: Is it safe for my teenager? Are there any known short or long-term effects from the vaccine? Could it cause fertility problems? Isn't it safer if my teenager contracted COVID-19 rather than get a newly designed vaccine? If my teenager already had COVID-19, why would it be necessary to get the vaccine now as well?

Concerning women's health, is it recommended for women who are pregnant or nursing?

These are good questions. Ultimately, no one can truly predict the future and know with certainty what will happen; however, as medical professionals we advise people based on the best evidence-based medicine we have to date.

After evaluating the available science and data, we know the following:

- The vaccines have been rigorously and extensively tested in tens of thousands of patients, including many males and females over the age of 16. While the science behind the vaccines is relatively new, the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) panel of physicians reviewed all the data and determined it was safe to release for emergency use for individuals 16 and older (Pfizer) and 18 and older (Moderna).
- There is no data to substantiate any claims of infertility, neither in women nor men. In fact, it appears that fertility is unaffected by the vaccines.
- Hundreds of millions of people have received the vaccine, and remarkably, only a handful of serious reactions have been noted.

On the contrary, contracting the actual virus engenders a much greater risk to our youth.

- Sadly, we are learning of some long-term consequences in individuals who contracted the virus, even in the younger age groups. Some cases of COVID-19 have reported persistent symptoms, including inability to participate in sport activities, respiratory issues, memory and cognitive difficulties, loss of stamina, and inflammatory syndromes--sometimes months after contracting coronavirus. The long-term effects of the virus are still being studied, and we know from other viral infections that there can be resulting health issues many years after the original infection.
- Some cases of COVID-19 infections during pregnancy have been quite severe and have had devastating effects on the health of the mother and/or fetus. Because of this, the American College of OB/GYN (ACOG) has recommended that pregnant and nursing mothers be offered the vaccine.

Weighing the risks and benefits, it appears that the most prudent approach is for everyone 16 years or older to receive the vaccine. This includes males and females, whether they had COVID-19 in the past or not.

**Therefore, at this time, we highly recommend all eligible candidates (16 years of age and older) receive a COVID-19 vaccine.** The theoretical risk of a health issue caused by the vaccine is exponentially lower than the immediate and long-term health risks associated with the highly transmissible coronavirus.

Please consider the benefits to yourselves, your family, and your community in helping our community return to “normal” by signing up to receive the vaccine. Parents with concerns should contact their pediatrician, and pregnant and nursing mothers should discuss this with their healthcare provider.

With Hashem’s help and the community’s participation, may we all merit good health and continued *bracha*.

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