

TOP TEN QUESTIONS

IMAMS & SCHOLARS GET ASKED ABOUT VACCINES

BBSI-G 11



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Imams & Scholars Get asked about Vaccines

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Empower Imams and Scholars in order that they might contribute to the spiritual, theological, emotional, individual and social welfare of Muslims, as well as to the common good of all people.

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COVID



Introduction

The British Board of Scholars & Imams (BBSI) is a national board of traditionally trained scholars and academics, some of whom are senior medical doctors, expert researchers & practitioners, including in fields such as sociology and anthropology. The BBSI has consulted its expert members and other Muslim scholarly and professional bodies, both from the UK and around the world, to produce these questions and answers. We have also liaised with official and independent bodies in preparation of this report.

A longer guidance, which will explore the issues in more detail, is also being produced, which will examine, among other things, how jurists take decisions on such issues, and how they select and appraise the information they rely upon to do so. **It is critical to note that much of the current controversy surrounding vaccination is premised upon what information is considered to be factual and which authorities are trusted.** Muslims have a long and proud history of examining exactly these questions, and the scholars consider them carefully.

This preliminary report has been produced to answer common questions that Imams and scholars are asked about vaccination, in order to help them to tackle these questions when they come. We pray it will be of some benefit. It should be noted that this is an evolving situation, and as some of the guidance here is based on current circumstances, it is accurate only insofar as the medical information we have relied upon remains accurate.

It should also be taken on board by the general public that a number of the legal rulings and advice noted in this report are differed upon by some scholars. The BBSI respects qualified difference of opinion, which is a central tenet of traditional Islamic knowledge, and advises individuals to discuss their own personal circumstance with their own scholars and health professionals. And Allah knows best.

1. Can I use medications with haram ingredients?

The brief answer is a qualified yes, if there is no equivalently effective alternative.

Haram is a legal category, which would mean that it would be sinful to engage in it and religiously obligatory to avoid it.

The point of medication is to remove illness, and we have been encouraged by the Prophet (pbuh) to seek cure: *'No illness has Allah sent down except that he has also sent its cure (except for death), so seek out cure'*. (Bukhari)

Because of this, a 'medication' might be considered haram only for specific reasons: it causes harm without benefit, or a harm significantly greater than the intended benefit, or that it is impermissible in itself.

- In this case, the scholars consider a risk-benefit analysis in consultation with experts: so if a medication causes harms (like side-effects), but these are judged by experts to be either unlikely or less severe than the intended benefit, the medication would be ruled permissible.

Usually, though, what people mean by a 'haram medication' is that it contains impermissible substances. What about them?

- This is differed-over in the classical legal schools. However, there is a valid position that, if a medication contains impermissible substances, but it is the most effective treatment for a condition, and there is no *equivalently effective* medication¹ with permissible substances, then it is allowed to take this medication (a principle known as *al-tadawi bil muharram*).
- There are other stricter positions, but virtually all agree that, **if there is no other treatment alternative for a significant illness, it is permissible to take medication with haram ingredients.**

1. This is as per expert medical opinion. Effective equivalent means that a doctor would have no qualms about recommending either.

2. Is gelatine in vaccines ok?

It should be noted that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines do not contain gelatine or any animal products. It is unclear at this moment whether the Oxford vaccine contains gelatine.

Gelatine is a widely-used substance produced from (usually) animal collagen, and is sourced from either cows or (more often) pigs. The default is: that which is extracted from impermissible sources is also impermissible – this would include cows not slaughtered in a halal way or any animal that is not permissible to eat at all (pigs, carnivores, etc).

However, there is an important exception to this: **if the substance undergoes a 'significant change' in its chemical nature or physical properties, then it becomes permissible** (known as *istihala* or *tabdil al-mahiyya*). The simplest example of this is grapes → alcohol → vinegar: a significant change occurs at each stage, and only alcohol is impermissible because its properties include being intoxicating.

The real question, then, is whether gelatine has undergone such a significant change as to render it now permissible. Scholars disagree about this, with a few stating that all gelatine in medication is permissible, others excluding porcine gelatine, and yet others deeming there to be an insufficient change in any impermissible animal gelatine to change the ruling from prohibition.

For those who view gelatine in medication as permissible, the medication is permissible; for those who view it as impermissible, the medication falls under the ruling above of *al-tadawi bil muharram*, and would only be acceptable if there was no equivalently effective (or simply alternative) medication available to take.

- In a situation where vaccines containing gelatine and those which do not are both available, it would be more religiously precautionous to request the latter.
- We are also working with other organisations to make gelatine-free alternative vaccines for the seasonal flu more readily available, for those who choose to adopt the stricter position.

3. Can I use vaccines that have foetal cells?

The currently available COVID vaccines neither contain nor have been produced using foetal cell lines.

No vaccine contains foetal cells – this is simply an incorrect statement.

Most vaccines need to be ‘carried’ in a harmless virus, like an ambulance that transports paramedics. These carrier viruses for vaccines need to grow in cells – whether animal or human: this is part of the process of their production. However, a cell is hundreds of times the size of a virus, so it is impossible for a cell to be in a virus! In the final production of the vaccine, there are no foetal cells.

It is true that some vaccine components may have been grown in stem cells derived from other stem cells that were originally sourced from a foetus (WI-38) that was aborted for in the 1970s.

However, that does not in any way render the vaccine impermissible, because of: (1) the process of *tabdil al-mahiyya* described above, (2) even if the original abortion was considered Islamically unlawful, the derived cells are still permissible to use.

- Babies have not been killed to produce vaccines! In fact, the derived cells from this foetus have been used to produce many different vaccines over the decades. In other words, this foetus has been estimated to have saved over 1 million lives!
- We are informed that, of the currently available COVID vaccines, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were not produced using foetal cell-lines, whilst the Oxford vaccine contains molecules grown in these descendent cells but which do not make it into the final product. **All these are therefore permissible from this perspective.**

4. Is it acceptable to inject ourselves with a virus?

It is permissible to expose oneself to a substance that is potentially mildly harmful in order to obtain a greater benefit, as is the case with vaccination.

Furthermore, major Islamic scholarly bodies around the world have accepted this as completely permissible.

It is understandable that people are worried about this, as it seems counterintuitive to deliberately get infected in order to protect oneself.

However this is based on a misunderstanding about how the immune system works – effectively by encountering something harmful (called an antigen) and then engineering your body's own response to it (what is known as an antibody).

The vast majority of human protection against infectious diseases works like this: you get exposed to the harmful pathogen and then develop an immunity to it. This process is occurring all the time. Effectively, it is like sparring before a boxing match: you learn how to take hits, defend yourself and respond in a safe environment.

Basically, a virus contains a 'head' and a 'tail'. The head bites you (causes illness), the tail gives you something to grab it by (the antigen/protein spike). A vaccine effectively comprises the tail without the head (or the head with the teeth removed).

Thus the vaccine allows you to grab the virus by the tail and create an antibody, without the risk of getting bitten by the head (or at least, suffering a less serious bite because it has no teeth).

You may get ill, but this will be a weaker form of illness than you might otherwise have got.

From a legal perspective, this is 'taking on a lesser harm to ward off a greater harm' (*haml akhaff al-darratayn*) which is an established principle in Islamic law. **So yes, vaccination is permissible.**

5. Isn't this vaccine going to change my DNA? Is that permissible?

The concern is understandable, **but there is no evidence of DNA changes because of these vaccines.**

Although there is always a theoretical possibility that introducing genetic material could affect the cell's own DNA, the likelihood is insignificant given all we know about how vaccines work.

- Even if that were the case, this would then happen even more so with the actual virus, so still would fall under the principle above of 'taking the lesser of two harms'.

The idea of introducing genetic material to the body might sound strange, but it is a fact of human life that we are exposed to RNA and DNA from foreign bodies all the time – viruses, other pathogens and even the food we eat.

There are two types of vaccines: those which use deactivated or weakened viruses to provoke a protective immune response in the body (like the Oxford COVID vaccine), and newer ones which use synthetic strands of mRNA (like the Pfizer or Moderna COVID vaccines).

- Neither one appears to affect the DNA inside the cell, nor have any vaccines (which have been around for decades) been shown to affect human DNA in any significant way.

The legal principle here would be that a **possible, hypothetical but unlikely harm is not given precedence over an immediate, proven and likely benefit** (*taghlib al-zann 'ala al-wahm*). This concern is therefore not of sufficient strength to render taking the vaccine impermissible. And that is only if the change in the DNA was considered harmful, which isn't necessarily the case (it would in all probability be inconsequential, even if it did occur).

- NB: There are some scholars who are unclear about this benefit/harm ratio, and who may prefer to suspend judgment and not offer an answer to this question (called *tawaqquf*).
- That is entirely within their rights, and we respect that stance.

6. Do I have a responsibility towards others to take it?

As almost all will be aware, our religion places an enormous emphasis on taking care of others and manifesting compassion. Allah says, *'one who saves a single soul is like one who has saved all humanity'*, and the Prophet (PBUH) said, *'a Muslim is one from whose hands and tongue others are safe'* (Muslim). Preservation of life is also one of the central goals of the Divine law.

Additionally, the responsibility to take care of our neighbours and those in whom we are in close proximity is part and parcel of our faith. Naturally, part of this is about not causing harm to others, whether deliberately or inadvertently.

The principle is: if an action is considered harmful to others, it would be either impermissible or disliked, depending on the likelihood and degree of harm caused. Equally if an action is beneficial to others, it would be considered recommended or obligatory, depending on the likelihood and degree of benefit attained.

As such, because vaccines generally help to potentially prevent the spread of a potentially lethal virus, it would validly be considered a recommendation - and even a responsibility - to take it even if no benefit accrued to oneself. However this ruling would of course depend on the evidence showing the likelihood and degree of potential benefit to others, and conditioned on the absence of harm to oneself.

There is also an important indication towards this selflessness in seeking to protect others, even if it means the possibility of harm to oneself in the famous hadith of contagion: *'do not enter or leave an area of plague.'* Those who remain in an area of plague risk harm to themselves, in order to preserve many others from that harm.

7. Shouldn't I just have *tawakkul*?

Tawakkul is to have complete trust in Allah, with the understanding that all benefit and harm come from Him, and only He has the power to avert harm or provide benefit.

It is one of the defining traits of the believer, and is mentioned around 50 times in the Quran, as well as many hadith.

However, it is critical to understand that the essence of tawakkul is to have **active reliance**, rather than passively accepting one's fate.

Tawakkul does not preclude resorting to the means which Allah has set out in order for us to achieve results both according to His decree (qadr) and His laws (shar'). Indeed it can be part of it.

Tawakkul involves cultivating submission to Allah and trusting that He grants benefit and harm as He pleases.

Helplessness should not be taken as a sign of tawakkul, nor should tawakkul make a person helpless. One should not ignore the means to endure a helpless state.

The famous advice of the Blessed Prophet (peace and blessings upon him) is to 'Tie your camel and then trust in Allah' – that is, to make reasonable efforts to achieve what is in your interests, whilst at the same time relying totally on Allah for the result.

In Islamic tradition, it is essential to **take the appropriate means while trusting in Allah**, thus upholding both the ultimate power of Allah and the wisdom of His creating of ways and means.

8. Is there a conspiracy to harm /tag us all?

This is not a question for ulama! However, it brings up an important question relating to this topic, which is: **how do we choose what information to believe?**

There is no credible evidence to suggest that vaccines or other forms of medication are being created and distributed for nefarious means.

There are of course huge problems with the pharmaceutical industry in terms of price-inflation, denying the poor access to medication, scandals about withholding or skewing of data and evidence, and so forth. However, none of these add up to the types of conspiracy theories being peddled!

In terms of worrying about those who might wish us harm (whether those close to us or the Bond-villain shadowy global cabals of the conspiracies!), the believer must always remember that **all power lies in the hands of Allah**, and that no harm can come to us save for what our Lord, in His Divine wisdom and mercy, has decreed for us.

In terms of worries about being 'tagged', we are already facing an unprecedented amount of scrutiny and intrusion into our private lives with our phones, CCTV, GPS, and other technological advancements.

They make our lives easier, but they also involve a sacrifice of our privacy. Every individual needs to consider what level of scrutiny they are happy to accept, of course - but this has nothing to do with vaccines!

This will be tackled in more detail in the forthcoming guidance, but Muslims should remember that one of the greatest achievements of our scholarly tradition was precisely the **verification of important information and assessment of the reliability of sources of knowledge**.

- As inheritors of that tradition, Muslims should be careful to do what they can to verify sources of information – especially in modern times where there is a great deal of misinformation that may seem enticing.

There is an enormous difference between facts/lies, speculation and qualified dissenting opinions, and we should note the difference between them.

9. Is it safe? What are the risk and benefits?

All available evidence indicates that the vaccine is safe.

When assessing permissibility, scholars (much like medical researchers) consider the likelihood and extent of harm versus benefit, in collaboration with experts. We also understand that there is a lot of conflicting information out there about vaccination in particular. However:

As a general principle, vaccines are among the most utilised medications in the world, ranking alongside tablets like Paracetamol. This is because so many people have taken them that any problems would become apparent very quickly.

If 1000 people take a medication and there was a 0.1% chance of it causing death, for example, that one person might be missed. But if a billion people were to take that medication, a million deaths are much harder to miss!

Because this clearly has not happened, it is evident that vaccines are, in general, safe for use - though of course, as with any other medication, individuals may react badly to them and suffer side effects, sometimes serious ones. But this also applies to anything that one consumes!

The COVID19 vaccines, of course, have been produced in record time (ten months rather than 18-24). Because of this, it is understandable that there is concern about their safety. However, there are a number of reasons for this which have nothing to do with 'cutting corners', including:

Unprecedented **funding**, which helps push trials forward at all stages.

Technological advancements, scientists were able to rapidly - and with high precision - sequence and unravel the genetic code of the virus within days of the outbreak, and use this to produce a suitably coded vaccine in record time.

Bureaucratic: cutting of 'red-tape'. This includes running different phases of testing in a staggered overlapping way rather than one after the other.

Volunteers / International collaboration – the sheer number of people who have participated in the trials from all walks of life (including those who have medical problems) has allowed for rapid reaching of end points (numbers of people naturally infected).

We have been reliably informed that the currently available vaccines have independently verified efficacy of over 90%, and though some side effects have been reported in both trials and early roll-out to over a million people thus far, there is nothing reported that concerns or surprises the health professionals.

- **This information we have is sufficiently robust, from an Islamic legal sense, to issue a ruling of permissibility.** If the facts about this change, the ruling may well change as well. We would advise Muslims to consult their doctors about any specific risks they are concerned about.

It should also not be forgotten that COVID is itself a deadly and highly contagious virus, which has already taken the lives of many in the community. Dealing with this is imperative.

The only way to blunt the harm of a virus is for the population to attain 'herd immunity', and this can only be achieved in two ways:

1. Let the virus spread uncontrolled among the population, which would result in unnecessary death and illness,
2. Engage in a mass-vaccination campaign.

Concerns about possible harm from side-effects of a vaccine would by no means outweigh the risks of uncontrolled spread, which would be far more harmful.

10. What if the government force me to take the vaccine?

Experts and policy makers do not agree that vaccine administration should be made law, and neither does the BBSI endorse this position.

It should be left to the individual's choice after consulting medical and religious expertise. This, however, also implies that individuals should then act in a responsible manner, to protect themselves and others.

Coercion, particularly in matters of healthcare, should be avoided by those in authority, as a matter of principle.

- Nonetheless, it is the responsibility of government to keep us all safe – **hence we encourage all to abide by restrictions** around social distancing, gathering, travel, wearing of masks, and other public health directives.

No-one should use the covid-19 pandemic to violate basic civil liberties, especially responsible governments which operate in democracies. Those responsible should work with civil society and human rights defenders to avoid a downhill spiral to curtail freedom and civil rights.

On a more general note, Muslims need to be aware that whilst healthy critique is welcome we are facing a serious breakdown in trust between experts and the general public. This has the potential to have a highly corrosive effect on all sorts of discourse. A healthy balance needs to be found, and the BBSI will be discussing this in its longer guidance paper.

Should my family member take the current vaccine?

It is clear that many people are sceptical about the vaccination, and while we have sympathy with this, given there amount of conflicting information out there, we have already received information from those on the ground that *'the hospitals are full (of COVID patients) and the vaccination clinics are empty'*.

As noted above, COVID is a deadly disease that has already claimed the lives of thousands of Muslims in this country.

The BBSI and others have endeavoured to clarify misunderstandings surrounding COVID-19 and vaccinations, but **it is not the role of the BBSI to recommend medical treatment** of any type to anyone.

It should be noted that – at minimum – there is **no valid shari' reason to avoid taking the vaccine**, whether because of impermissible ingredients, proven side-effects, or other reasons. **Vaccination is permissible.**

1. If done, under advice, in order to protect one's health and with the firm conviction that benefit and harm lie in Allah's hands, then one is following the Sunna of 'seek the cure'.
2. If done with the intention of safeguarding others from harm, and to assist the community more generally, it is a general religious recommendation.

If there is a choice between vaccines that do not contain animal products, and those that do, it would be religiously more precautionous to take the former, though positions about permissibility exist for both. The BBSI is working to ensure that healthcare providers are aware of the sensitivities of Muslims with regards to these issues.

Individuals should therefore consider the medical and theological considerations when discussing with their GP or health professional when taking decisions about their health.



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