

Jeff Bernhard:

Hi. I'm Jeff Bernhard, your host of Hitting a Higher Mark. I am, as you know, President of the Commercial Markets here at Highmark. Welcome back to this episode of Hitting a Higher Mark. In this podcast, we will explore topics that are transforming how healthcare is paid for and delivered.

Jeff Bernhard:

Today as part of our COVID-19 mini-series, we will be discussing everything you need to know about the vaccine. From how it works to dispelling myths, our expert here today, Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher, will be discussing everything you need to know about the vaccine. I'd like to welcome Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher. She is the Vice Chair of Allegheny Health Network's Primary Care Institute, and Medical Director for Telemedicine at Allegheny Health Network.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Crawford-Faucher, thanks for joining me today, and let's dive into today's topic.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Thanks for having me.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher, the COVID-19 vaccine of course, has been a much anticipated solution to overcoming the current pandemic, but not everyone understands the vital role vaccines play in helping build what we call herd immunity. So could you start by telling us how the COVID-19 vaccine works and why it's important for everybody to get vaccinated?

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Sure. I think in general, the question is how do vaccines work? Every vaccine works by basically putting a little clue into your body that's not the bacteria or virus that you want to fight off, but a piece of it. That alerts your body to build an immune response so that if you get exposed to that infecting agent, your body can rev up and fight it off. The different COVID vaccines work in different ways, which I think we're going to discuss in a minute. But that's a very effective strategy that we've used as you know, for decades to treat other infectious diseases.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Getting the vaccine is really important for both personal and public health reasons. Personally, it's really the only way that we have, unless you're going to live in a cave by yourself for the rest of your life, to be able to get back out into society because all of the vaccines that we have so far are extremely effective in preventing severe COVID disease. Meaning it's going to keep you out of the hospital and likely keep from killing you. So that's really important personally.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

From a public health standpoint, it's really important that we get lots and lots of people vaccinated. When you have a new disease, like COVID-19 nobody in the world literally has any natural immunity to it. So there's no other way to fight it off unless you've gotten it and recovered or gotten the vaccine. Viruses need to spread to survive, and they need hosts that they can replicate and infect in order to

spread. So the more people we have immune the less the ability for the virus to move from person to person, and that's how we stop this.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. At the time this podcast is being recorded in March 18th, 2021, there are currently three vaccines that are available to the public, those that qualify at this time; Pfizer, Moderna Johnson & Johnson. Could you walk through the differences between these three vaccines? And the second part of that is, are there more vaccines expected to be approved by the FDA and released to the public?

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Yeah, sure. Everyone has heard, I think about the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, which are the ones that we are currently using the vast majority of in Pennsylvania. There's been a lot of buzz about the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines because they use what everybody has heard about, mRNA technology. That's caused both excitement and consternation and concern among people because it sounds new. I think the first part that I personally, as a person who got the vaccine and as a physician found reassuring, is that, yes, this is the first time we've been using it in wide scale immunization efforts. But the research about these vaccines have been going on for decades. It's not like we started from scratch a year ago and said, "Hey, let's build a new vaccine." This work has been going on. It's just people weren't aware of it because we didn't have this need for it.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

The mRNA vaccines are very exciting for a number of reasons. Basically the only difference between an mRNA and a vaccine and our older models is the vehicle that the vaccine uses to get a message into our bodies and how to produce a protein that your body can then respond to. mRNA is part of genetic material, but, and this is key, it doesn't get into the vaccinated person's DNA. It doesn't get into the nucleus, the center, the brain of your cell, so it can't change your DNA. It basically gets in there to the part of the cell that makes proteins and says, "Please make this protein." Because this protein, which is part of the COVID-19 the coronavirus virus, it gets in and says, "Make this little spike protein so that the body says, Oh, if I see the coronavirus coming at me, I know how to rev up and fight it." That's the mRNA vaccines, which are Moderna and Pfizer.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

The Johnson & Johnson one uses an older technology, which we've used for vaccines for decades. It just uses a different vehicle to get that same message into the body.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Crawford-Faucher, does it matter which vaccine someone gets? Are they all relatively safe and effective? You had said this a second ago; you had the vaccine. What side effects should people anticipate, and should certain people maybe anticipate different side effects based on age, gender, comorbid conditions, et cetera.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Sure. Let me answer the first part first. They're all safe. These have all been extensively studied around the world. Again, we're being very aggressive, the CDC and the FDA are. If reaction happens, even though most likely it's not related to the vaccine, we report as such, just so they can start to accumulate

millions of data, so now that we've given millions of vaccines. Yes, they're found to be safe and effective. The key thing to remember, because we've heard different percentages about the different vaccines is, is one better than the other? The reality is that all the vaccines on the market right now, including AstraZeneca in other parts of the world not approved here yet, Johnson & Johnson, Moderna and Pfizer are all extremely effective at preventing severe disease.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

So if you think about it, it would be great to prevent all COVID-19 infections even the mild ones, but what we really care about is keeping people out of the hospital and keeping them from dying from COVID. That is the real key for a vaccine, and they're all about equally effective in doing that.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

It looks like from the studies that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are somewhat more effective in preventing mild disease as well. However, there's a caveat here. Those studies were done much earlier in the pandemic when there were fewer variants traveling around in the population. There's a lot of suspicion that if we did the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine trials now we probably would see effectiveness rates closer to what we saw with Johnson & Johnson, if that makes sense. So they're all probably really in the 70% range effectiveness for preventing all disease, which is terrific. Some years, the flu vaccine is 40 to 50% effective. So you put that in context.

Jeff Bernhard:

There's a lot of misinformation out there about the vaccine. We're going to hit a few quick topics here and you can tell us whether it's a myth or a truth. A bit of a game.

Jeff Bernhard:

If someone has had coronavirus, do they still need to get vaccinated?

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Yeah, we really do recommend that people get the vaccine, whether or not they've had COVID for a number of reasons. First of all, we don't really know yet how long your natural immunity will stay if you get the COVID infection. We know from vaccines from other infectious diseases that the immunity that a vaccine causes is often much more longstanding than from what you might get from getting the infection. So it's safer to get the vaccine as well.

Jeff Bernhard:

This one, I think you answered already, I think you confirmed it. Getting the COVID-19 vaccine will not alter somebody's DNA, correct?

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Exactly. It does not get anywhere close to the DNA parts of a cell.

Jeff Bernhard:

Okay. Can you talk about women and fertility. Does the vaccine impact their ability to get pregnant?

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Sure. There are two things to think about. It is true that pregnant women were not knowingly included in the vaccine trials, which is a problem. On the other hand, we've had about 300 deliveries from people who got the vaccine. Meaning they may not have known they were pregnant when they got the vaccine or they did, and they still decided to get it. There have been absolutely no issues with birth defects in the child. Again, because there's no biological way that this vaccine could get into any component of a growing baby and make a difference. So there's that piece of it. And there had been hundreds of pregnancies since then in women around the world, who got the vaccine earlier.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Again, there is some misinformation floating around on the internet about a particular protein that has some effect on fertility. That protein is nowhere in any of the vaccines that are being used on the market for COVID vaccine.

Jeff Bernhard:

Okay. Thank you. For those listening and watching, obviously people watch the news, listen to the news, there's this whole discussion about vaccine availability and when you're eligible for it. Where we're recording this podcast now, of course, Pennsylvania bumps up against West Virginia and Ohio, and there's different times when certain groups are eligible. Can you talk about the rollout, the distribution, and then how it's determined at the state level as to who's eligible and when they're eligible?

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Sure. I think it is very fair to say that West Virginia seemed to jump out in front of other surrounding states early on in the vaccine roll out, and that is because West Virginia approached their rollout and their eligibility criteria differently than Pennsylvania. If you go back a step, the federal government distributes vaccine to the states based on the total adult population in that state, so that's how the state gets a clump of vaccine. And then each state, and this is why it's so confusing for patients and for people trying to organize vaccine rollout, is that every state made up their own rules. For instance, in New York state, they put teachers in the very first category, but Pennsylvania, it did not.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

I think part of the confusion for Pennsylvania is that instead of moving from 1A to 1B, we have moved huge swaths of people who were previously in 1B into the 1A category. So even though we have not officially moved past 1A, we've moved patients into the 1A, which previously was nursing home residents and staff and healthcare workers. We've moved four million patients into that 1A status. And now teachers have just been moved into the 1A status as well.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

I think you've got to be careful at looking at what we say when we say, who's eligible, what category are we at? We are immunizing those groups of people now. It's just that we haven't officially changed eligibility categories.

Jeff Bernhard:

That leads me to my last question. For the folks listening across the country that aren't in the area of the country we are, most people don't realize that Highmark Health is a blended integrated health system, where we are an insurance provider, but we also are a significantly large health system with Allegheny

Health Network, which makes us a bit unique in this area, and that we kind of become a leader in setting up mass distribution clinics. Can you talk a little bit about what Allegheny Health Network is doing or Highmark Health is doing in the community to help open mass vaccination clinics and get the public vaccinated?

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Sure. It's been a really exciting partnership throughout. Very early on, we were able to get our own clinical staff vaccinated in a timely way so that we were able to open up to healthcare workers who were not affiliated with a healthcare system and therefore didn't have easy access. So that was incredibly important. Dentists, physical therapists, that sort of thing, so that was great.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Additionally, we are doing micro and macro events, if that makes sense. We are currently doing daily vaccine clinics at all of our hospitals in Western Pennsylvania, and actually a little bit in Upstate New York. We are running at least one and sometimes more per week mass vaccination clinics throughout the Pittsburgh and Western PA region where we do five to 6,000 often in a day, which has been a marvelous combination of Highmark Health and AHN staff, for the clinical staff for actually administering the vaccines and observing patients, but the Highmark Health for helping to reach out to patients, some of whom have Highmark insurance, but some who do not.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

And a piece of that is really looking out into the community, whom we serve and say, "Who's not getting the vaccine yet." So that is elderly people who are home-bound. So we are going into senior high rises and underserved communities to vaccinate those people, which is very exciting. And then actually doing targeted outreach through using our Highmark Health data for people who have a high likelihood of not getting easy access to the vaccine and contacting them directly and helping them get scheduled for a vaccine.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Crawford-Faucher, I want to thank you for joining us on this episode of Hitting a Higher Mark. Thank you for your leadership at Allegheny Health Network and playing your part, not just day-to-day as a primary care physician, but also helping people that you don't even know get vaccinated and helping this country and this area of the country become a safer place.

Jeff Bernhard:

I want to thank everybody for listening to this episode To learn more about COVID-19 vaccine and how we all can play an important part in keeping our communities safe and healthy. To listen to an extended video version of this interview.

Jeff Bernhard:

I'll start that again.

Jeff Bernhard:

To listen to an extended video version of this interview, visit us at youtube.com/highmarkinc. That's Highmark Inc. The link will be displayed in the description box below.

This transcript was exported on Mar 25, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Jeff Bernhard:

This is Jeff Bernhard, your host of Hitting the Higher Mark. Again, Dr. Crawford-Faucher, I want to thank you. We'll see you next time.

Dr. Amy Crawford-Faucher:

Thanks for having me.