

COVID-19 Vaccines & Fetal Cell Lines

In various stages of vaccine development and manufacturing, some of the COVID-19 vaccines used cells originally isolated from fetal tissue (often referred to as fetal cells), some of which were originally derived from an aborted fetus. The use of fetal cell lines is a very sensitive and important topic within some faith communities and among individuals with concerns about the ethics of using materials derived in this way.

It is crucial for everyone to have all of the appropriate information to make a fully informed decision regarding COVID-19 vaccination. For those with questions or concerns about the use of fetal cell lines in vaccine development, please view the information presented in this handout and keep the following considerations in mind when making your vaccine decision:

- For us to break the chain of disease transmission and protect our community from COVID-19, we will need the vast majority of the public to get vaccinated against the virus.
- Vaccinating not only protects you, but may also protect your family, friends, and those in our community most vulnerable to severe disease from COVID-19.
- The risks and benefits of COVID-19 vaccination will vary from person to person, and individuals may want to consider discussing this with their own healthcare provider.
- Several religious and bioethics groups have reviewed and commented on the ethical considerations of receiving the current COVID-19 vaccines. Many of those considerations are cited below.
- While vaccine supply remains limited, you may not be given a choice on which COVID-19 vaccine you can receive.
- Individuals may want to consider having a personal conversation with their faith leader or someone experienced in bioethics.

Why are fetal cells used to make vaccines?

Historical fetal cell lines were derived in the 1960's and 1970's from two elective abortions and have been used to create vaccines for diseases such as hepatitis A, rubella, and rabies. Abortions from which fetal cells were obtained were elective and were not done for the purpose of vaccine development.

The fetal cell lines being used to produce some of the potential COVID-19 vaccines are from two sources:

- HEK-293: A kidney cell line that was isolated from a fetus in 1973 ([undisclosed origin](#), from either a spontaneous miscarriage or an elective abortion)
- PER.C6: A retinal cell line that was isolated from an aborted fetus in 1985

Any vaccine that relies on these historic cell lines will not require nor solicit new abortions.

To develop and manufacture some vaccines, pharmaceutical companies prefer human cell lines over other cells because 1) viruses need cells to grow and the viruses tend to grow better in cells from humans than animals (because they infect humans), 2) fetal cells can be used longer than other cell types, and 3) fetal cells can be maintained at low temperatures, allowing scientists to continue using cell lines from decades ago. While fetal cell lines may be used to develop or manufacture COVID-19 vaccines, the vaccines themselves **do not contain any aborted fetal cells**. A comprehensive list of COVID-19 vaccines in development and any connection to abortion-derived cell lines is available [here](#).

Were the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines developed using fetal cell lines?

The mRNA COVID-19 vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna **do not require the use of any fetal cell cultures in order to manufacture (produce) the vaccine**.

Early in the development of mRNA vaccine technology, fetal cells were used for “proof of concept” (to demonstrate how a cell could take up mRNA and produce the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein) or to characterize the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein.

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were found to be **ethically uncontroversial** by the pro-life policy organization [the Charlotte Lozier Institute](#). Further, the [Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities](#), a committee within the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, has stated: “neither Pfizer nor Moderna used an abortion-derived cell line in the development or production of the vaccine. However, such a cell line was used to test the efficacy of both vaccines. Thus, while neither vaccine is completely free from any use of abortion-derived cell lines, in these two cases the use is very remote from the initial evil of the abortion...one may receive any of the clinically recommended vaccines in good conscience with the assurance that reception of such vaccines does not involve immoral cooperation in abortion.”

Was the Johnson & Johnson (Janssen Pharmaceuticals) COVID-19 vaccine developed using fetal cell lines?

The non-replicating viral vector vaccine produced by Johnson & Johnson **did require the use of fetal cell cultures, specifically PER.C6, in order to produce and manufacture the vaccine**.

The [Catholic Church](#) and the [Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission](#) have both stated that **receiving a COVID-19 vaccine that required fetal cell lines for production or manufacture is morally acceptable**. The [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) goes further and has stated: “receiving a COVID-19 vaccine ought to be understood as an act of charity toward the other members of our community. In this way, being vaccinated safely against COVID-19 should be considered an act of love of our neighbor and part of our moral responsibility for the common good...Given the urgency of this crisis, the lack of available alternative vaccines, and the

fact that the connection between an abortion that occurred decades ago and receiving a vaccine produced today is remote, inoculation with the new COVID-19 vaccines in these circumstances can be morally justified.”

On March 2nd, 2021, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement which addressed the use of Johnson & Johnson’s COVID-19 vaccine. The Bishops **stated**: “if one can choose among equally safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, the vaccine with the least connection to abortion-derived cell lines should be chosen. Therefore, if one has the ability to choose a vaccine, Pfizer or Moderna’s vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson’s...While we should continue to insist that pharmaceutical companies stop using abortion-derived cell lines, given the world-wide suffering that this pandemic is causing, we affirm again that being vaccinated can be an act of charity that serves the common good.”

The **Catholic Church** has stated, “Those who, however, for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccine produced with cell lines from aborted fetuses, must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent. In particular, they must avoid any risk to the health of those who cannot be vaccinated for medical or other reasons, and who are the most vulnerable.”

Where can I find more information?

Some religious groups and bioethics institutes that oppose the use of aborted fetal cells in the development or manufacturing of vaccines have noted that individuals may ethically receive these vaccines when there are no ethically derived alternatives.

For more information from these groups on this issue, check out the following links:

- [National Catholic Bioethics Center](#)
- [Pontifical Academy of Life Statement](#)
- [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)
- [The Vatican – Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](#)
- [The North Dakota Catholic Conference](#)
- [Charlotte Lozier Institute](#)
- [The Pillar – The ultimate Catholic coronavirus vaccine morality explainer](#)