

International students required to take mixed Covid vaccines, are concerned about their health

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As many universities resume in-person teaching, some international students are debating whether they should get additional shots of Covid vaccines.

Zhilin Huang, 23 years old, is a Chinese graduate student majoring in operations research at Columbia University. She was fully inoculated with two shots of a Covid vaccine produced by Sinovac, a Chinese pharmaceutical company. The Covid vaccine had been approved by the World Health Organization (WHO) for emergency use, yet, Huang still felt anxious once she arrived in the US.

“Because of the Delta, I was freaked out. And I’m also afraid my immunity is starting to wane over time,” said Huang in Chinese.

On the day Huang landed in New York, she received her first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at a CVS near her apartment. She quickly realized she had made a mistake.

“My heart beats so fast, up to 150[MBP], I felt very dizzy, like running on a track for many hours, I almost faint. Then my roommate got me in her car and drove me to the ER,” said Huang.

At the emergency room at Mount Sinai Hospital, Huang went through a series of examinations, including blood and urine tests, and an X-ray. A doctor told Huang she was diagnosed with an

inflammatory heart condition, a rare side effect associated with Pfizer vaccines. But due to a lack of research findings, he was unable to conclude whether her condition was related to mixing Covid vaccines.

Huang took the extra vaccine voluntarily, but Areena Arora, 25-year-old, a graduate student from India, had no choice.

Though Arora had received two shots of Covaxin back home, Columbia University told her this did not meet their vaccination requirement. Covaxin is a vaccine manufactured by Bharat Biotech that is not currently approved by the WHO.

“After I received the second dose [of Pfizer], I had a fever around 102 degrees Fahrenheit, and I was shivering in the middle of the night, and I was very irritated, I have none of these symptoms with my Covaxin shots in India,” said Arora.

More than 400 universities in the United States rolled out vaccine mandates in early March, according to BestColleges.com. These policies mean that international students who have limited access to the eight WHO-approved vaccines have to be revaccinated once they reached the US.

The requirement is particularly difficult for Indian students, like Arora. In May, India hit record-high cases of COVID-19, but vaccine shortages had led to only 17.9 percent of the population being fully vaccinated, according to the Global Change Data Lab. Unlike American students

with access to WHO-approved vaccines, Indian students struggled to obtain vaccines that Columbia University will acknowledge.

Columbia University proposed that international students who got unauthorized vaccines be revaccinated, which throws these students into a medical dilemma, especially as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not yet endorsed a ‘mixing and matching’ approach, meaning getting an additional vaccine different than the vaccine used initially, due to lack of data.

“We don’t know much about the side effects of mixing two different Covid vaccines,” said Wafaa El-Sadr, the Center for Infectious Disease director at the School of Public Health at Columbia University, “We are still waiting for a definite answer.”

However, it is clearly that from the public health perspective, the benefits of getting Covid vaccines outweigh the defects.

“It is not the case that all of the vaccines would be 100 percent effective against the Delta variant, but most importantly, they work very well to prevent people who contracted the virus to get hospitalized,” said Dr. El-Sadr.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Covid vaccines are crucial to limit the spread of the virus and minimize severe disease.

Indeed, vaccination is the best way to protect the community, but the policy did not consider international students with severe side effects of previous Covid vaccines.

Nisha Shetty, another Indian graduate student at Columbia University, was concerned about receiving another vaccine because of her severe reaction to her last Covid vaccination in India, which she is still experiencing today.

“I felt paralyzing pain on the right side of my back, and then later, both of my feet swelled up. I wasn’t able to fit into my sneakers, which was very scary,” said Shetty.

Her doctors back home told Shetty that she might be allergic to a vaccine chemical, which is not usually seen with Covid vaccines. After Shetty arrived in the US, she submitted a medical exemption to Columbia University for extra WHO-approved vaccines. The university, however, rejected her request in an email, assessed her reaction as “likely normal.”

“I’m pro-vaccination,” Shetty said, “But what I’m not for is taking a third and a fourth shot after knowing that I have had this reaction.”

In the email, Melanie Bernitz, the senior vice president of Columbia Health wrote, “Our committee of trained medical, human resources, and other professionals carefully reviewed de-identified versions of the documentation you submitted, and has determined that your request for exemption cannot be granted as the justification provided does not meet the criteria to qualify for an exemption.”

However, Columbia health officials refused to make the number of different types of approved exemptions public.

Gayle Gatchalian, the associate communication director at Columbia Health, wrote in emails that the university policy follows CDC's public health guidance, but she could not disclose the number because they protect public health information for a very small group of individuals.

Following the vaccine policy, Shetty had the first dose of Pfizer vaccine on September 3 and received her last dose on October 14, lucky with no severe reactions this time.

“I had a fever and arm pain for one day, and that’s a normal reaction,” Shetty said, “But I still think I should have received a medical exemption, what happened to me previously was not normal at all.”