

Priority COVID-19 Vaccination of U.S. Merchant Mariners

Due to the constant risk of exposure and transmittal of COVID-19, U.S. merchant mariners should be considered for priority vaccination.

U.S. merchant mariners play a critical role in our Nation's international and domestic supply chain to support the distribution of vitally important personal protective equipment, ventilators, and other urgent medical supplies, as well as maintaining U.S. national security sealift requirements. The nature of their work makes them extremely vulnerable for COVID-19 infection due to living and operating in close quarters, far from medical services, and within constantly changing geographic locations. They transport commerce along our coastlines, Great Lakes, inland waters and internationally, and interact with a myriad of port workers and government inspectors. Merchant mariners need due consideration for priority vaccination.

Mariners work on board vessels 24/7 without knowing the full magnitude of the risk to which they are being exposed. Their confined place of work is also their residence where they interact with others, whether at sea or ashore. There are limited testing options for COVID-19 on board, and one infected crew member may easily infect the rest, especially due to the prevalence of asymptomatic spread. For mariners on international waters, there are no treatment options on board other than telemedicine, leaving the infected mariners without professional care for days or even weeks at a stretch. Upon making the next port, many mariners were denied debarkation or medical assistance because of concerns for virus infection. Additionally, U.S. mariners embark or disembark from vessels anywhere in the world, requiring travel to and from their homes, further exposing them and others.

All frontline critical infrastructure essential workers are important. Due to their constant risk of exposure and transmittal of COVID-19, U.S. merchant mariners should also be considered for priority vaccination.

Source: CMTS C-19 Working Group (https://www.cmts.gov/topics/working_group).