

The Evolving Definition of “Vaccine” in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary for 2021

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Theme: [History](#)

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The popular online dictionary, Merriam-Webster.com, has had the same definition for “vaccine” for several years.

Here is the definition until early to mid-January, 2021:



The screenshot shows the Merriam-Webster website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with "Dictionary" and "Thesaurus" tabs. Below the navigation bar, the word "vaccine" is displayed in a large, bold font, followed by the word "noun". Underneath, there is a "Save Word" button and the phonetic transcription "vac-cine | \ vak-'sēn \, 'vak-,sēn \". The definition of "vaccine" is provided: "a preparation of killed microorganisms, living attenuated organisms, or living fully virulent organisms that is administered to produce or artificially increase immunity to a particular disease". The date "JAN 08 2021" is visible in the top right corner of the screenshot.

By January 26, 2021 it was changed to include a section on “genetic material” and mRNA:

vaccine noun

 Save Word

vac-cine | \ vak-'sēn , 'vak-,sēn \

Definition of *vaccine*

: a preparation that is administered (as by injection) to stimulate the body's immune response against a specific infectious disease:

- a** : an antigenic preparation of a typically inactivated or attenuated (see ATTENUATED sense 2) pathogenic agent (such as a bacterium or virus) or one of its components or products (such as a protein or toxin)
- b** : a preparation of genetic material (such as a strand of synthesized messenger RNA) that is used by the cells of the body to produce an antigenic substance (such as a fragment of virus spike protein)

Apparently that was not quite good enough to silence the critics who were claiming that the COVID-19 shots did not meet the definition of a “vaccine,” so it was changed again by June 1, 2021 to include examples of mRNA “vaccines” such as Moderna and Pfizer, “viral vector” vaccines such as J&J and AstraZeneca, and a completely new definition to cover some “vaccines” the military is working on: *a preparation or immunotherapy that is used to stimulate the body’s immune response against noninfectious substances, agents, or diseases.*

vaccine noun

Save Word

vac·cine | \ vak-'sēn , 'vak-,sēn \

plural **vaccines**

Definition of *vaccine*

- 1 : a preparation that is administered (as by injection) to stimulate the body's immune response against a specific infectious agent or disease: such as
 - a : an antigenic preparation of a typically inactivated or attenuated (see [ATTENUATED](#) sense 2) pathogenic agent (such as a bacterium or virus) or one of its components or products (such as a protein or toxin)
 - // a [trivalent](#) influenza *vaccine*
 - // oral polio *vaccine*
 - // Many *vaccines* are made from the virus itself, either weakened or killed, which will induce antibodies to bind and kill a live virus. Measles *vaccines* are just that, weakened (or attenuated) measles viruses.
 - Ann Finkbeiner et al.
 - // ... a tetanus toxoid-containing *vaccine* might be recommended for wound management in a pregnant woman if [greater than or equal to] 5 years have elapsed
 - Mark Sawyer et al.
 - // In addition the subunit used in a *vaccine* must be carefully chosen, because not all components of a pathogen represent beneficial immunological targets.
 - Thomas J. Matthews and Dani P. Bolognesi
 - b : a preparation of genetic material (such as a strand of synthesized [messenger RNA](#)) that is used by the cells of the body to produce an antigenic substance (such as a fragment of virus [spike protein](#))
 - // ... Moderna's coronavirus *vaccine* ... works by injecting a small piece of mRNA from the coronavirus that codes for the virus' spike protein. ... **mRNA vaccine** spurs the body to produce the spike protein internally. That, in turn, triggers an immune response.
 - Susie Neilson et al.
 - // The revolutionary **messenger RNA vaccines** that are now available have been over a decade in development. ... Messenger RNA enters the cell cytoplasm and produces protein from the spike of the Covid-19 virus.
 - Thomas F. Cozza
 - // Viral **vector vaccines**, another recent type of *vaccine*, are similar to DNA and RNA *vaccines*, but the virus's genetic information is housed in an attenuated virus (unrelated to the disease-causing virus) that helps to promote host cell fusion and entry.
 - Priya Kaur

NOTE: Vaccines may contain [adjuvants](#) (such as aluminum hydroxide) designed to enhance the strength and duration of the body's immune response.
- 2 : a preparation or immunotherapy that is used to stimulate the body's immune response against noninfectious substances, agents, or diseases
 - // The U.S. Army is also testing a ricin *vaccine* and has reported success in mice.
 - Sue Goetinck Ambrose
 - // ... many of the most promising new cancer *vaccines* use dendritic cells to train the immune system to recognize tumor cells.
 - Patrick Barry

I wonder what this “definition” of “vaccines” will be expanded to include next?

Noah Webster Jr. was the original founder of America’s most famous dictionary, and in 1831, George and Charles Merriam founded the company as G & C Merriam Co.

In 1964, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. acquired Merriam-Webster, Inc.

In 1996, Britannica was purchased by Jacob E. Safra, a Jewish Swiss-bank financier.

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