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Pentagon releases religious exemption guidelines for bypassing mandatory vaccine

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The Pentagon on Tuesday released guidelines for how service members could request a religious exemption in lieu of getting the coronavirus vaccine.

By mid-September, all active-duty forces in the military will be required to get shots in their arms to counter the coronavirus as cases continue to once again increase nationwide.

DEFENSE SECRETARY TO MANDATE COVID VACCINE FOR US MILITARY BY SEPT. 15

"There is a religious exemption possibility for any mandatory vaccine, and there's a process that we go through to counsel the individual both from a medical and from a command perspective about using a religious exemption," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Tuesday.

Kirby said military service members who wish to seek an exemption will be required to be counseled by a medical professional and a

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assignments – though the request processes will differ in each branch.

"We take freedom of religion and worship seriously, in the military, it's one of the things that we sign up to defend," Kirby said. "And so it's something that's done very carefully."

Exemptions for pre-existing medical conditions will be permitted as well, though those will be identified by a medical professional.

Kirby also said that any service member who is hesitant to receive the vaccine will receive counseling on its safety and effectiveness.

"We have every expectation that once the vaccines are made mandatory, the troops are going to....do the right thing," he said. "Going forward with this particular vaccine, the secretary's expectation is that commanders are going to treat the administration of that vaccine with – as he wrote in his memo – professionalism, skill, and compassion."

Kirby's comments come just one day after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin formally announced all service members who are not already vaccinated will be required to receive either the Pfizer, Moderna, or Johnson & Johnson vaccine by Sept. 15.

Austin said the mandatory vaccinations could be enforced sooner if the Food and Drug Administration approved one of the vaccines prior to mid-September.

More than 74 percent of Navy service members have received the vaccine. But other branches have lagged behind.

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Ronn Blitzer, Lucas Y. Tomlinson contributed to this report.

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