COVID-19 Immunization Q&A

Immunization is a safe and effective way of preventing illness caused by infectious diseases. Below are answers to common questions about COVID-19 immunization.

COVID-19 Vaccines

Q: What COVID-19 vaccines are available in Canada?

A: To learn about the COVID-19 vaccines authorized for use in Canada, visit: https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/drugs-vaccines-treatments/vaccines.html

Q: What is a COVID-19 messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine and how does it work?

A: A COVID-19 mRNA vaccine is a new type of vaccine that teaches our cells how to build immunity to the virus that causes COVID-19. The currently licensed COVID-19 mRNA vaccines contain specific genetic information on how to make a spike protein found on the surface of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 disease. Our bodies' cells then makes the small protein which is used to trigger an immune response to the virus. Our immune system will later recognize the COVID-19 virus and remember how to fight it. The antibodies that our bodies produce then protect us from future infections. What is left of the RNA is then quickly broken down and expelled from the body. The mRNA does not integrate into our genetic material or DNA.

Q: How do I know the COVID-19 vaccine is safe?

A: Even though COVID-19 vaccines are being developed more quickly than usual, vaccine safety is still a top priority in all phases of vaccine development, approval and post-approval monitoring. While steps are being streamlined or overlapped, none of them are being skipped.

To learn more about COVID-19 vaccine safety, visit https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/covid-19-vaccine-treatment/safety-after-authorization.html

Q: Can vaccines protect people against COVID-19 when it has mutated?

A: Viruses typically mutate. A mutation is when the genetic material in the virus changes. Mutations happen at different rates in different viruses. They do not necessarily affect how well a vaccine works against a virus. There are SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern that have appeared and the manufacturers and regulators are monitoring the situation closely. At this time, there is no evidence that the vaccine would not work with the variants found.

Vaccines against some viral diseases remain effective for many years after their development and provide long-lasting protection. These include vaccines against measles and rubella. Vaccines against other viral diseases like influenza need updating every year to remain effective. This is because the flu virus mutates often with new variants appearing with each flu season. It is not yet known if the COVID-19 vaccine will provide long-lasting protection. This is because more data is needed from ongoing and additional studies in the long term to understand how long protection lasts after COVID-19 immunization.

Q: Who monitors COVID-19 vaccines?

A: The Public Health Agency of Canada actively monitors the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Public Health Agency of Canada is increasing the monitoring and assessment of emerging safety issues involving COVID-19 vaccines, and is collaborating and sharing information with partners in Canada and around the world such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

Vaccine manufacturers are also required to continuously monitor the use of their health vaccines and report any side effects to Health Canada. To learn more about the monitoring of COVID-19 vaccines, visit: https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/drugs-vaccines-treatments/vaccines/pfizer-biontech.html and https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/drugs-vaccines-treatments/vaccines/moderna.html

To see weekly reports on possible reactions following immunization, visit https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/vaccine-safety/

COVID-19 Immunization

Q: Who can get the COVID-19 vaccine?

A: Because of initial limited supplies, COVID-19 vaccines are available to priority populations first. Then they will be available to everyone in Canada who is recommended to get the vaccine by federal, provincial and territorial public health authorities.

Priority for early COVID-19 immunization is given to the following people:
- Residents and staff of shared living settings who provide care for seniors
- Adults 70 years of age and older, with order of priority:
  - Beginning with adults 80 years of age and older
  - Decreasing the age limit by 5-year increments to age 70 years as supply becomes available
- Healthcare workers who have direct contact with patients, including those who work in healthcare settings and personal support workers
- Adults in Indigenous communities

For more information on COVID-19 immunization priority populations, visit COVID-19 vaccine: Guidance on the prioritization of initial doses - Canada.ca https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/guidance-prioritization-initial-doses-covid-19-vaccines.html

Q: Will I have to pay for it?

A: No, COVID-19 vaccines approved for use in Canada are free. As more vaccines become available, free vaccines will be available to every Canadian who wants one.

Q: Where can I receive it?

A: Check with your provincial or territorial public health authority for information on where to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. For more information, visit https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/prevention-risks/covid-19-vaccine-treatment/vaccine-rollout.html#a6

Q: What are the side effects from COVID-19 immunization?

A: Like all medicines, vaccines can cause side effects. Most of these are mild and short term, and not everyone gets them. Even if you get side effects after the first dose, you still need to get the second dose for best protection. The same side effects can be more common after the second dose. Common side effects include:
- Painful, heavy feeling and tenderness in the injection site. This may be worst around 1 to 2 days after vaccination.
- Feeling tired.
- Headache.
- General aches or mild flu-like symptoms.

These symptoms normally last less than a week. If your symptoms persist or worsen, contact your healthcare provider immediately.

Q: Can I be immunized against COVID-19 if I received the flu vaccine?

A: In general, it is safe to receive a COVID-19 vaccine if you have been vaccinated against influenza. However, it is not recommended that you receive an influenza vaccine at the same time as a COVID-19 vaccine. It is best to wait 14 days after any vaccine to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, and 28 days after your last COVID-19 vaccine before receiving any other vaccine.

Q: Can you catch COVID-19 from the vaccine?

A: No, you cannot catch COVID-19 from the vaccine. None of the COVID-19 vaccines available in Canada use live virus that causes COVID-19. You may have side effects after you receive the vaccine. This is normal and is a sign that your immune system is learning how to recognize and prevent the virus that causes COVID-19.

Q: If I receive the COVID-19 vaccine, do I still need to wear a facemask or practise social distancing?

A: Yes, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada, while experts learn more about the protection that COVID-19 vaccines provide, it is important for everyone – even those who were vaccinated – to continue.

Q: How long will protection from the COVID-19 vaccine last?

A: Both COVID-19 infection and vaccines are new. Medical and public health experts do not yet know how long protection lasts. It is therefore important that you continue to follow public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19, including social distancing, hand washing, staying at home when you are sick and wearing a facemask as appropriate.

Preparing for COVID-19 immunization: How to make your COVID-19 immunization a positive experience

Q: What should I expect during COVID-19 immunization?

A: Healthcare workers are being careful to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during immunizations. You will be asked to follow infection prevention safety measures also, including social distancing, wearing a facemask and washing your hands frequently. The vaccine takes time to work and it will take time to protect everyone in the community – public health infection prevention measures need to be followed.

Q: How can I prepare for immunization day?

A: Here are some tips that can help you plan for COVID-19 immunization:
  o Learn how to make immunization more comfortable using the CARD^{TM} system. To learn about how the CARD^{TM} system can help you, visit https://immunize.ca/card-adults
  o Try to eat something before your immunization and afterwards.
  o You will receive the vaccine in your upper arm. Wear short sleeves or something easy to pull up so that the upper arm can be reached easily.
  o Bring any supplies you need, such as a facemask and something to distract you.
  o Do not tense your arm where the needle is going in – keep it loose or jiggly like cooked spaghetti.
  o If you feel faint or get dizzy during needles, you can squeeze your knees together or ask to lie down.
  o Have acetaminophen available in case you experience any side effects after, but there is no need to take it prior to the vaccine. Let your healthcare provider know if you are experiencing any side effects that worry you.
  o Keep a record of the vaccine you received.

Q: What to do if you are not well?

A: If you are unwell, it is better to wait until you have recovered to receive the vaccine. You should not attend a vaccine appointment if you are sick, self-isolating or waiting for a COVID-19 test result.

Q: Does an immunized person present a risk to unimmunized family members in the same house?

A: COVID-19 vaccines are not composed of live viruses, so there is no infectious virus to spread from a vaccinated person to someone else. But given that families may not all get immunized at the same time, those who have been immunized should continue to practise public health measures when they are out in the community, to decrease the chance of introducing the virus in the home through asymptomatic infection. Likewise, even when a whole family is immunized, continuing to practise these measures will be important for two reasons:
  • Someone in the home may still be susceptible.
  • People outside of the family's "bubble", such as co-workers, extended family members, neighbours, and others they come into contact with, may not have been immunized.

For more information, visit https://www.chop.edu/news/feature-article-when-whole-family-has-not-yet-been-vaccinated-against-covid-19