FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:
COVID-19 VACCINES AND IMMUNIZATION

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE PFIZER-BIONTECH AND MODERNA mRNA VACCINES

What are the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines?
As of December 23, 2020, Health Canada has approved two vaccines for use in Canada. Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is a two-dose series, given 21 days apart. Moderna vaccine also requires two doses, given 28 days apart. Both vaccines are given intramuscularly in the upper arm (just like your flu shot). There are no preservatives or adjuvants in the vaccines.

If you do not receive your second dose after 21 or 28 days (depending on the vaccine), complete your two-dose series as soon as you are able to do so. You do not need to restart the series.

How do mRNA vaccines, like the COVID-19 vaccines, work?
Health Canada describes mRNA vaccines as vaccines that teach our cells how to make a protein that will trigger an immune response without using the live virus that causes COVID-19. Once triggered, our body then makes antibodies. These antibodies help us fight the infection if the real virus does enter our body in the future.

RNA stands for ribonucleic acid, which is a molecule that provides cells with instructions for making proteins. Messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines contain the genetic instructions for making the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein. This protein is found on the surface of the virus that causes COVID-19.

When a person is given the vaccine, their cells will read the genetic instructions like a recipe and produce the spike protein. After the protein piece is made, the cell breaks down the instructions and gets rid of them. The cell then displays the protein piece on its surface. Our immune system recognizes that the protein doesn’t belong there and begins building an immune response and making antibodies.

Can the mRNA vaccine alter a person’s DNA?
No. mRNA is not able to alter or modify a person’s genetic makeup or DNA. The DNA of a cell is in the nucleus and protected from the rest of the cell by a double thick walled membrane. The cell response to the mRNA that enters the cell occurs outside of the nucleus.

Is it safe?
All vaccines are approved by Health Canada. The COVID19 vaccine(s) completed the same development and approval process as all other vaccines approved for use in Canada. Find out more about the development and approval process.

How was Health Canada able to approve the COVID-19 vaccines so quickly – did they lower their safety standard for vaccines?
Health Canada shortened the administrative and organizational processes for vaccine authorization. The safety requirements in clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccines were just as strict as the regular process for any other vaccine.
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INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 VACCINES

Can the COVID-19 vaccine cause a COVID-19 infection?

No. None of the COVID-19 vaccines currently in use or development use the live virus SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. It is not possible to get the infection from the vaccine.

Can COVID-19 vaccines cause a false positive COVID-19 viral test?

No. COVID-19 vaccines will not cause a positive test on COVID-19 viral tests like PCR, which are used to see if a person has a current infection. If a person’s body develops an immune response, which is the goal of vaccination, they may test positive on some antibody tests. Antibody tests indicate that a person had a previous infection and may have some level of protection against the virus. Antibody tests are not being used for diagnosis of COVID-19 in Ontario except in very special clinical circumstances where it is unclear if a person had an infection in the past. Antibody tests are not used in assessment and testing centres or long-term care homes. Any person that tests positive on an antibody test is required to follow up with a nasal swab PCR test to confirm the positive test result.

VACCINE ELIGIBILITY AND PRECAUTIONS

Who is eligible to receive the COVID19 vaccine?

In Ontario the COVID19 vaccine is being rolled out in three phases. Initial doses of authorized COVID-19 vaccines are being offered to individuals at higher risk. In the first phase, doses of the vaccine will be available for:

- residents, staff, essential caregivers (including family caregivers) and other employees who work in congregate living settings providing care for seniors as they are at higher risk of infection and serious illness from COVID-19
- health care workers, including hospital employees, other staff who work or study in hospitals and other health care personnel
- adults in First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations where infection can have disproportionate consequences, including those living in remote or isolated areas where risk of transmission is high
- adult recipients of chronic home health care

This will be followed by other priority groups before the vaccine is available to the general population sometime in the spring/summer of 2021.

Can people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 be vaccinated?

Yes. However, priority may be given to those with zero immunity to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as vaccine supply is limited at this time.

Due to the severe health risks associated with COVID-19 and the fact that re-infection with COVID-19 is possible, people can still get a COVID-19 vaccine even if they have been sick with COVID-19 before. At this time, experts do not know how long someone is protected from getting sick again after recovering from COVID-19. The immunity someone gains from having an infection, called natural immunity, varies from person to person. We won’t know how long immunity produced by vaccination lasts until we have more data on how well it works. Those who have previously had confirmed infection should still be vaccinated and individuals do not need COVID-19 testing prior to vaccination.

Can the COVID-19 vaccine be given at the same time as other vaccines?

No. If a person just received a vaccine (i.e. flu shot), they must wait 14 days until receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. If a COVID-19 vaccine is received, a person must wait 28 days after the second dose to receive any other vaccines, unless the vaccine is required for post-exposure prophylaxis (i.e. rabies).
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I have symptoms of COVID-19, can I receive the vaccine?
The COVID-19 vaccine needs to be deferred until symptoms are no longer present and/or isolation period for COVID-19 is completed. This is because:

- Symptomatic persons should be home in isolation away from others
- Symptomatic persons must complete a full 10 days of isolations (+ symptoms improving) prior to leaving your home
- Not to confuse symptoms of a current illness with a possible reaction to the vaccine

Each person who attends a vaccine clinic will be screened prior to entry for signs and symptoms of COVID-19. Anyone symptomatic will be turned away and recommended to seek COVID-19 testing at a local assessment centre. If someone is currently in self-isolation for being a close contact of a confirmed case, they must complete their self-isolation period before being vaccinated.

Can people with severe allergies to a component of the COVID-19 vaccine receive the vaccine?
No. People with a history of severe allergic reaction to a component of the COVID-19 vaccine or its container should not receive the vaccine. A complete list of the ingredients in both vaccines is available on the Health Canada website. Most of the ingredients are not known to ever be associated with severe, immediate allergic reactions. There is one ingredient called Polyethylene glycol (or PEG) that is able to cause severe reactions in very rare cases. It is also found in bowel preparation products for colonoscopy, laxatives, cough syrup, cosmetics, skin care products, and some food and drinks.

Can people with severe allergies to other vaccines, medicines or foods receive the COVID-19 vaccine?
Currently, individuals with a history of a severe allergy for which they have been prescribed an epi-pen are advised NOT to receive the COVID-19 vaccine without prior consultation with their health care provider. This recommendation is made out of an abundance of precaution.

Who should NOT be vaccinated at the current time because of lack of information from clinical trials?
People under 16 years of age, those who are pregnant or breastfeeding, and those who are immunosuppressed due to disease or treatment or suffering from an autoimmune disorder should not receive the COVID-19 vaccine until further evidence is available.

However, there are some people in these groups who may be able to receive the vaccine if a health care provider determines that the benefits of vaccine outweigh the risks for the individual and the person consents understanding that there is a lack of evidence on the effects of the vaccine in these groups.

Are there any other precautions with receiving the vaccine?
People who have a fever or are sick with COVID-19 symptoms should wait until they are feeling better to receive the vaccine. Women are advised to avoid trying to get pregnant for at least two months after getting both doses of the vaccine. People with a bleeding disorders or who are on blood thinner medications should consult their health care provider before getting vaccinated.
CONSIDERATIONS AFTER RECEIVING THE VACCINE

I have been vaccinated, why do I need to keep following public health measures?

We are still learning about the protection that COVID-19 vaccines provide under real-life conditions, therefore it is important for everyone to continue following public health measures to help stop this pandemic. At this time, scientists are uncertain if the vaccine prevents infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus and possible asymptomatic transmission. We know it protects you from getting sick, but we are uncertain if you could still pass the virus to someone else without developing symptoms yourself. Covering your mouth and nose with a mask, staying at least 2 metres away from others outside your household and self-isolating when sick will help to avoid any asymptomatic transmission that may still occur after you are vaccinated. Health care and other staff must still wear personal protective equipment (PPE) as directed by your agency, even after you have been vaccinated.

What are the side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines?

The most frequent adverse reactions or side effects are injection site pain, fatigue and headache. Some people receiving the vaccine in trials also reported muscle pain, chills, joint pain and fever. These symptoms were usually mild or moderate in intensity and resolved within 1-3 days after vaccination. These are all expected reactions to vaccines because of the immune response and are very similar to those reported following the seasonal influenza vaccination.

If a person develops an adverse reaction to a vaccine, what should they do?

If someone experiences a side effect following immunization, they should report it to a health care provider. Treatment will be provided by your regular health care provider. Any side effects that are greater than listed on your aftercare sheet from the immunization clinic or that are concerning to you should be reported to SMDHU Immunization Program at 705-721-7520 ext. 8806. One of our immunization nurses will collect the information and advise you on next steps.

In rare cases, serious allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) can occur from vaccines. Health care providers at all COVID-19 immunization clinics will have the medications and skill necessary to deal with any emergency allergic reaction. Allergic reactions can be treated and are usually temporary but it is important to seek medical attention if trouble breathing, hives or swelling of the face and throat occur after vaccination. Vaccine side effects will continue to be monitored as people receive the vaccine. Health care providers will report side effects directly to public health units like SMDHU and public health will keep track of the reported side effects and adjust guidance as required.

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This situation is changing rapidly. Visit our website for regular updates:
www.smdhu.org/COVID19