The First Nations Health Authority's (FNHA) Medical Officers and Nurses recommend the COVID-19 vaccine to help protect individuals, their families and their communities. Here’s what you need to know about the vaccine’s safety, effectiveness and rollout.

For information about vaccination clinics, please see FAQ questions 13 and 15.

1. **What is the COVID-19 vaccine?**
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(Updated on April 21, 2021)
1. **WHAT IS THE COVID-19 VACCINE?**

Vaccines are products that produce immunity to a specific disease like COVID-19. When you are immune to COVID-19 that means you may be exposed to it without becoming sick or if you do become infected, it can prevent more severe illness.

Currently, there are four COVID-19 vaccines authorized for use in Canada: the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the Moderna vaccine, the AstraZeneca vaccine, and the Janssen (Johnson & Johnson) vaccine. Each of the first three require two doses to become fully effective, while the Janssen vaccine requires only one dose.

There are three additional COVID-19 vaccines seeking approval by Health Canada.

2. **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO GET A COVID-19 VACCINATION?**

The COVID-19 vaccines are the best way to protect you against COVID-19, which is a serious and sometimes fatal disease. In clinical trials, those who received a vaccine were 63 to 95 per cent less likely to become sick with COVID-19 and were almost completely protected against severe illness (hospitalization and death).

When you get immunized, you help protect others as well, including those who are unable to get the vaccine. The more people in a community who are vaccinated, the harder it is for the virus to spread and mutate (also see FAQ 10).

Reduced access to stable housing, income, clean water and/or health and social services place some Indigenous peoples at higher risk of COVID-19. The vaccine is one way that Indigenous (and other) people can protect themselves from this virus.

Despite publicized vaccine efficacy rates that seem to indicate large differences between vaccines, when examined carefully, the evidence does not support that one vaccine is overall better than another one.

What is clear is that all of the vaccines available in Canada are excellent at preventing hospitalization and death, which is the main purpose of getting the vaccine. Delaying your injection in hopes of getting a vaccine you think might be better only leaves you and others unnecessarily at risk of contracting and becoming very ill or even dying from COVID-19.

The FNHA's Medical Officers strongly recommend that you opt to get the vaccine when offered one.

3. **WHEN DO I NEED TO RECEIVE THE SECOND DOSE OF THE VACCINE?**

The time between the first and second doses has been extended to approximately 16 weeks to ensure as many people as possible can receive a first dose of vaccine. Modelling has shown that this is the best way to slow transmission as quickly as possible and for us to return to a more normal life.

This decision was based on research in BC and elsewhere that shows the COVID-19 vaccines give a very high level of protection after the first dose, which lasts for some time. The research also shows that recipients can safely wait for a second shot without losing benefit.

Thanks to this change – and to increased vaccine supplies – it’s estimated that everyone in BC who wants to be vaccinated can receive their first dose some time before the end of June.
4. ARE COVID-19 VACCINES SAFE?

After the distribution of millions of vaccines across Canada and many more millions around the world, there is strong evidence that the COVID-19 vaccines are safe and highly effective across different ages of adults (including seniors/Elders), sex, race and ethnicity.

Feeling worried or hesitant is normal when something is new and it is understandable that some people – especially Indigenous people – may lack trust in the medical system.

Vaccine trials go through rigorous, well-established ethical reviews before they start. Canada’s approval process (shown in this infographic) is among the strongest in the world. While Health Canada used a fast-tracked process for the COVID-19 vaccines, no standards were changed for reviews and approvals. We can feel assured that vaccines – including the COVID-19 vaccines – are safe, effective and that they will save lives.

Some people are concerned about reports about blood clots experienced by some women under age 55 (fewer than four in one million) after receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine.

BC previously paused the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine while the benefits and risks for people under the age of 55 were further assessed. They have now assessed that it is highly effective and the benefits far outweigh the risks for those 55 and over. The vaccine is now available for this age group through local pharmacies.

People 64 and older and Indigenous peoples 18 and over, as well as individuals who have received a “clinically extremely vulnerable” letter, are also being invited to book vaccines through immunization clinics. FNHA-led clinics in First Nations communities have offered Moderna or Pfizer vaccine.

The occasional recommendation to halt use of a particular vaccine entirely or within certain groups is to be expected and is a signal that the global vaccine safety systems are working. This gives Health Canada and others around the world time to investigate any possible associations and to ensure the continued safe delivery of vaccine programs.

For additional information on vaccine safety, visit this link at the BC Centre for Disease Control: Monitoring vaccine uptake, safety and effectiveness

5. WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 VACCINES?

The most common kinds of reactions occur because your immune system is responding to the vaccine. These side effects are usually mild and similar to ones you might get from any shots: pain in the arm at the site of the injection, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, joint pain and low-grade fever. These reactions may be stronger for some people, particularly after the second dose. Reactions usually don't last more than a few days.

Allergic reactions are fortunately rare, but can occur when receiving any vaccine or medicine. Symptoms of an allergic reaction include hives (bumps on the skin that are often very itchy); swelling of the face, tongue or throat; and/or difficulty breathing.
Allergic reactions are treatable by the medical staff who administer the vaccine. This is why you must wait at least 15 minutes before you leave the clinic or pharmacy after receiving the vaccine - and longer if you have a history of allergies. Clinic staff have the training and medications required to respond to an allergic reaction.

Extremely rare blood clots (fewer than four per million doses provided around the world) have been noticed after receipt of the AstraZeneca vaccine, mostly in women under age 55. If you have received the AstraZeneca vaccine and have not experienced any symptoms within 20 days, there is no concern.

Above all, the major health risks associated with getting COVID-19 far outweigh the minor risks or discomfort from possible allergic reactions and side effects.

6. SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE IF I’VE TESTED POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 IN THE PAST?
If you've had COVID-19 you should still get the vaccine once you have recovered. This is because you may not be immune to the virus that causes COVID-19 and you could get infected again. It is important that you wait the full isolation period before getting the vaccine so that you do not expose people at your vaccination clinic to the virus.

7. SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE WHEN I AM IN QUARANTINE?
You should not get vaccinated if you are in quarantine:
- on the advice of public health officials due to possible contact with COVID-19
- following travel outside the country

If you live in a remote or isolated community scheduled for a vaccine clinic, and have been quarantining, you may be able to receive the vaccine if the vaccine provider is able to do so in a way that minimizes the risk of exposure for others. You must be exhibiting no symptoms and will be asked to have a symptom check immediately prior to vaccination.

8. SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE IF I’M PREGNANT OR BREASTFEEDING?
Experts say that pregnant and breastfeeding individuals would benefit from receiving the vaccine as the risk of getting COVID outweighs the potential risk of being vaccinated during pregnancy.

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, please contact your health care provider about whether the vaccine is right for you at this time.

9. WHEN WILL THE COVID-19 VACCINE BE OFFERED TO YOUTH UNDER THE AGE OF 18?
Currently in BC, only people 18 and older are eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. Although the Pfizer vaccine has been authorized for use on 16- and 17-year-olds in some jurisdictions that is not yet the case in Canada. Health Canada is reviewing data from Pfizer for youth ages 12-17 and will review information for the other vaccine products and ages as it becomes available.

In the meantime, it is important that children and youth continue to practice the public health measures of physical distancing, hand-washing, masks (if over age two), and staying home when sick. It is also important to keep your child or youth up to date with routine immunizations for other vaccine-preventable diseases. A strong immune system is important to reduce the impact of COVID-19.
10. WHAT ARE VARIANTS AND DOES THE VACCINE WORK ON THEM?
A variant is a strain of the COVID-19 virus that has mutated. The current variants of concern in BC are the B1.1.7 and P.1. They spread more easily and cause more severe illness than the original virus.

The current vaccines may be slightly less effective against some of the variant strains of COVID-19 – but they can still provide enough protection to reduce the seriousness of any infection that does occur.

Individuals will be better protected against variants by accepting the COVID-19 vaccine when offered one because not only will they get individual protection, when more people have even some immunity, the transmission of the virus can be slowed by community immunity.

11. CAN WE STOP FOLLOWING THE PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDELINES AFTER WE ARE VACCINATED?
Not yet. We need to continue to adhere to all of the recommended public health measures even if we’ve been vaccinated. That’s because we don’t know how long the vaccine will last or how well it prevents us from transmitting COVID-19 to others, even if we don’t have symptoms.

To stop the spread of the virus, enough people need to be immune either through natural infection or immunization. The WHO estimates that at least 70 per cent of the entire population would need to be immune to ensure community immunity.

12. WHAT IS THE VACCINE PLAN FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN BC?
There are two methods by which Indigenous people in BC will be vaccinated.

1. The province is offering mass vaccination clinics prioritized by age group. This is usually the best option for people who live away from home (off-reserve). (See FAQs 13 and 14.)

2. The FNHA is working with First Nations communities to offer community clinics for members age 18 and older. While intended for those who live on reserve, some can serve members who live off-reserve but nearby. (See FAQ 15.)

All Indigenous people in BC age 18 or older may now register for a COVID-19 first-dose vaccination appointment as part of the province’s mass vaccination clinics.

Register online at: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/getvaccinated.html

In order to register online, you must provide your first and last name, date of birth, postal code, your Personal Health Number and an email address or a phone number that can receive text messages.

After registering, confirmation via email or text should come within 15-30 minutes, but could take up to 24 hours.

You can also register by phone at 1-833-838-2323. This new provincial number replaces the phone lines the health authorities had been operating. Phone lines are open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., every day, with reduced hours on statutory holidays. Callers who self-identify as Indigenous (status or non-status First Nations, Metis or Inuit) can register if they are 18 or older. There is no requirement to provide proof of ancestry.
14. **SHOULD I RETURN TO MY HOME COMMUNITY FOR VACCINATION**  
No. To do our part to stop the spread of COVID-19, we need to continue to follow public health orders and avoid non-essential travel. However, some First Nations clinics are scheduling appointments for members who live off reserve but close to community, and therefore do not have to travel a long distance to reach the clinic.

15. **HOW WILL COMMUNITIES BE NOTIFIED THAT THEY WILL BE RECEIVING THE VACCINE?**  
Chiefs will receive official confirmation from FNHA’s CEO when vaccines are available for their community. FNHA regional teams will then provide wrap-around support to move forward with community vaccination campaigns as needed. Community leaders may refer to the [Toolkit for Communities Receiving COVID-19 Vaccine](#). If you’re a health care professional, you can refer to the [BC Centre for Disease Control Question and Answer Document](#).

**Some things individuals can do to be ready for when vaccine is available in their communities:**
- Talk to your health care provider to see if the vaccine is right for you or if you have any concerns about your allergies or medical conditions, or side effects of the vaccine.
- Watch for the invitation to book an appointment. Or call your health centre to book an appointment or find out about clinic locations.

The FNHA is promoting a “whole of community” approach in which everyone age 18 and over is offered immunization. As of March 31, 2021, every First Nations community in BC had been offered a first-dose vaccination clinic. More clinics are being held for people who missed receiving their first dose and second-dose clinics will soon be scheduled as well.

**MORE INFORMATION ON THE COVID-19 VACCINES**
The FNHA works closely with our regional, provincial and federal health partners and can recommend and support the important information they provide:
- [The BC Centre for Disease Control](#)
- [Health Canada website](#)
- [Immunize BC](#)

If you are a client or health care provider with clinical questions or concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine and do not have access to a primary care provider, call First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day at 1-855-344-3800. Medical Office Assistants are available to help you seven days per week from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

You can also call 8-1-1 or check in with your community nurse.

For all current information, articles and resources visit our [COVID-19 web portal](#). You can also check our [news section](#) for informative articles written by the FNHA’s Medical Officers.