



First Nations Health Authority  
Health through wellness

# What You Need to Know About the COVID-19 Vaccine

The beginning of vaccine rollout in First Nations communities is excellent news. However, rollout of the vaccine will be slow to start, so it is more important than ever for individuals, families and communities to continue public health measures. Everyone is reminded to avoid social gatherings and that socialization must be limited to immediate household bubbles. Please follow public health guidance such as physical distancing, washing your hands regularly and wearing a mask. We will not be able to stop these measures until most people have been vaccinated.

## 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.

## Why is it important to get a COVID-19 vaccination?

- Vaccines save lives. Vaccines don't just protect the people getting vaccinated; they can protect everyone around them too. The more people in a community who are vaccinated and therefore protected from COVID-19, the harder it is for it to spread.
- Widespread immunization is the best option to protect people from COVID-19.
- As more people get vaccinated, we will be able to return to activities that haven't been possible during the pandemic.
- The First Nations Health Authority's (FNHA) Medical Officers strongly recommend that Indigenous people opt to get the vaccine when they are offered one.

## How does the vaccine work?

- The first COVID-19 vaccines are called messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines. RNA stands for ribonucleic acid, which is a molecule that provides cells with instructions for making proteins. These vaccines essentially teach our cells how to make copies of the coronavirus' spike protein that are harmless to us (do not cause disease), which triggers an immune response if we become infected with the virus.
- The Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines require two doses to be fully effective. The second dose is administered between 21 and 42 days after the first.

- The vaccines are about 92 per cent effective 14 days after the first dose and 95 per cent effective after the second dose.
- As with any vaccine, the COVID-19 vaccines may not fully protect all those who receive them.
- Questions remain about how long immunity lasts and whether a vaccinated person can still transmit the disease. Research into these and other questions continues.

### **How many COVID-19 Vaccines are there?**

- Currently, there are two COVID-19 Vaccines authorized for use in Canada:
  - As of December 9, 2020 the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has been approved for use in Canada.
  - As of December 23, 2020 the Moderna vaccine has been approved for use in Canada.
- Supply of these vaccines will increase in the coming weeks, allowing for more people to receive them.
- Additional COVID-19 vaccines are under review by Health Canada. Once the clinical trials for these potential vaccines have been completed and have passed the review process, there may be additional vaccine products authorized for use in Canada. Worldwide, there are more than 150 vaccines in development. Canada has agreements with several companies to receive enough doses in 2021 for the entire population

### **I've heard that people may not be getting the second dose of the vaccine as scheduled. Will it still work?**

- The World Health Organization (WHO) Advisory Group on Immunizations allows for the second dose to be given up to six weeks (42 days) after the first dose in countries or areas where there is a high rate of transmission and limited vaccine supply. This is to allow as many people as possible to benefit from a first dose.
- The strength of the immune response and long-term effectiveness of the vaccine is not expected to be decreased by this delay. If an individual's second dose is delayed more than 42 days after their first dose, it is recommended they receive their second dose as soon as possible and no doses will need to be repeated.

### **Is the COVID-19 vaccination safe?**

- Vaccines are safe. To ensure vaccines are safe, there are many processes and standards in place. The COVID-19 vaccine has been rigorously tested.
- In Canada, new vaccines must go through three phases of clinical trials (studies) before being approved for use in the general public. There are hundreds or even thousands of participants who volunteer to take part in the third phase of the clinical trials. These trials provide crucial information on vaccine safety as well as effectiveness. After clinical trials, Health Canada must review the evidence and approve any vaccine before it is used in Canada.


- Before a vaccine is offered in Canada, Health Canada will ensure:
  - It's safe,
  - It works,
  - There are consistent, high-quality manufacturing processes, and
  - That the benefits of getting the vaccine outweigh the risks of not getting it. There is strong evidence that the vaccine is safe and works for people 18 years and over - including seniors - and that it is highly effective across age, sex, race and ethnicity.
- COVID-19 vaccines have not yet been tested in people who are under 16 years old, pregnant, or have some immune-compromising conditions (e.g., people undergoing chemotherapy, are breast feeding or who've had an organ transplant). The vaccine isn't recommended for these people at this time.
- As more data becomes available, Health Canada will assess new clinical data, such as evidence to support use in broader populations (e.g., children).
- The vaccine is recommended for people with underlying health conditions, such as diabetes and/or heart disease. This is because most people with underlying health conditions are vulnerable to developing a severe illness if they do get coronavirus, and vaccines are the most effective way to prevent that from happening.
- If you had, or may have had, COVID-19 you should still get the vaccine when it's available to you. This is because you may not be immune to the virus that causes COVID-19 and you could get infected again and become sick. If you are unsure, check with your primary care provider.

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

- Only minor side effects were observed in clinical trials, similar to ones you might get from any shots. These include pain at injection site, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, joint pain and fever. These reactions are mild and generally last one to two days. They are evidence that your immune system is working to respond to the vaccine.
- Should you develop any serious symptoms or symptoms that could be an allergic reaction, seek medical attention right away. Symptoms of an allergic reaction include: hives (bumps on the skin that are often very itchy); swelling of the face, tongue or throat; and difficulty breathing. This is why you are asked to wait 15 minutes before you leave the clinic after getting a vaccination.

### **Is the vaccine safe for me to get if I have an underlying health condition?**

- The vaccine is generally recommended for people with underlying health conditions, such as diabetes, asthma and/or heart disease. This is because most people with underlying health conditions are vulnerable to developing a severe illness if they do get COVID-19, and vaccines are the most effective way to prevent that from happening.

- 
- However, COVID-19 vaccines have not yet been tested in people who take medications to suppress the immune system or have some immune-compromising conditions (e.g., autoimmune diseases or people undergoing chemotherapy). Therefore, a conversation with your care provider and or specialist is recommended to review the risks and benefits of the vaccine. As more data becomes available, Health Canada will assess new clinical data, such as evidence to support use in broader populations like children. Speak with your health care provider if you are unsure whether the vaccine is right for you.

### **Is it safe for me to get the vaccine if I have allergies?**


- Health Canada recommends that people with allergies to any of the ingredients in the vaccines should not receive them. An ingredient in the vaccines that has been associated with a rare but serious allergy (anaphylaxis) is polyethylene glycol (PEG). PEG can be found in some cosmetics, skin care products, laxatives, some processed foods and drinks, and other products. Learn more about the ingredients and recommendations from Health Canada.
- If you have experienced a serious allergic reaction to another vaccine, drug or food or skin care product you should talk to your health professional before you receive the vaccine.
- The Moderna vaccine ingredients are published here:  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/drugs-vaccines-treatments/vaccines/moderna.html>
- The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine ingredients are published here:  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/drugs-vaccines-treatments/vaccines/pfizer-biontech.html>
- Vaccines continue to be monitored for safety after they are approved. They are monitored locally, provincially, nationally and globally. If you have an adverse reaction following immunization, it is important you let your immunization provider know.

### **Should I get vaccinated for COVID-19 if I'm pregnant or breastfeeding?**

- COVID-19 vaccines have not yet been tested widely in people who are pregnant or breastfeeding. However, most pregnant and breastfeeding women would benefit from receiving the vaccine, as the risk of not getting vaccinated may outweigh the potential risk of being vaccinated during pregnancy.
- If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, please connect with your health care provider about whether the vaccine is right for you at this time.

### **Should I get the vaccine if I have tested positive for COVID-19 or already had COVID-19?**

- Yes, if you had, or may have had, COVID-19 you should still get the vaccine when it's available to you. This is because you may not be immune to the virus that causes COVID-19 and you could



get infected again and become sick. If you are unsure, check with your health care provider.

- If you recently tested positive and currently have COVID-19, you should wait three months until after the testing date to get your vaccine.

### **How long will the COVID-19 vaccine protect me? Will I have to get a COVID-19 vaccine every year?**

- The short answer is we don't know. This vaccine has not been around long enough to know how long the protection will last. Clinical studies continue to measure the effectiveness over time for this vaccine. Health Canada and other immunization experts will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the vaccines.

### **I still feel nervous about getting the vaccine...**

- Vaccination is a personal choice that most Canadians agree is part of good health and important for prevention of serious disease.
- The COVID-19 vaccine is an option the FNHA's Medical Officers recommend to protect you, your family and your community.
- 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. However, vaccine trials go through rigorous, well-established ethical processes. *We can feel assured that vaccines are safe, effective and that they will save lives.*
- Reduced access to stable housing, income, clean water and/or health and social services place many Indigenous peoples at higher risk of COVID-19. The COVID-19 vaccine is one way that Indigenous peoples can protect themselves from this virus and build “Community Immunity.”

### **How did we get a COVID-19 vaccine so fast?**

- Scientists have been able to develop COVID-19 vaccines quickly thanks to high levels of government funding, by sharing information and working together across countries, and building on technology they already use in existing, successful vaccines.
- In addition, groups like Health Canada shortened the bureaucratic processes, for example, by reviewing data while clinical processes were going on. However, the safety approval processes have not changed. The requirements for safety data in clinical trials are as stringent as ever.

### **What is the FNHA's vaccine rollout plan and who will get the vaccine first?**

- Until vaccines become more widely available, the FNHA is focusing vaccine rollout on rural and remote communities and communities that have already experienced larger number of COVID-19 cases.

- The FNHA, First Nations Health Council and First Nations Health Directors Association will continue to work with regional health authority partners to advance approaches that include urban and away-from-home (i.e., off-reserve) members, and with regional teams and First Nations leaders to identify the next set of communities for priority implementation.
- The FNHA is taking a “whole community” approach in which everyone age 18 and over will be offered immunization.

### **What is the broader vaccine rollout plan for the province and Health Canada?**


- Initially, only small quantities of vaccine will be available, requiring that vaccinations take place in a sequenced rollout.
- The Moderna vaccine was approved by Health Canada Dec. 23, 2020 and started going out to communities the week of Dec 28. Though it is still fragile, it doesn't have such strict storage requirements and is suitable for administering in long-term care facilities and community settings.
- Other vaccines will also become available in 2021 after they have passed rigorous approval processes. Until they are more widely available, the following groups are being prioritized:
  - Residents and staff of long-term care and assisted living facilities.
  - Health care workers providing care to COVID-19 patients in settings like intensive care units, COVID-19 medical wards, and emergency departments.
  - First Nations people in rural or remote areas.
  - Older adults. The age requirement for Indigenous adults will be lower than the rest of the population due to a higher rate of health risks and other factors that have affected equitable access to health care.
- Check this page for updates as more vaccines are approved and more supplies become available: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/covid-19-vaccine/eligibility>

### **How are the vaccines being distributed?**

- The first vaccine, by Pfizer-BioNTech, is being transported into the province to predetermined “drop sites” in highly populated areas that have the ultra-cold (less than minus 70 degrees) storage facilities the vaccine needs. The FNHA is working with Regional Teams and the Regional Health Authorities to safely transport some of this vaccine.
- Moderna and the other upcoming vaccines have less rigorous storage requirements and are much easier to transport and store in various locations around the province. There should be no need to travel to a city to get the vaccine.
- The FNHA is working to make sure you can access the vaccine when it is available for you.

### **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.

### **Is there anything I need to do before the vaccine comes to my community?**

- Please refer to the [Toolkit for Communities Receiving Covid-19 vaccine](#).
- Some things individuals can do to be ready for when vaccine is available in their communities.
- Get informed:
  - Review the health file hyper link: [Here](#)
  - 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.

### **Will we be able to stop wearing masks and other measures to protect ourselves from COVID? Will life go back to normal?**

- 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 whether 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 World Health Organization estimates that at least 70 per cent of the population would need to be vaccinated to ensure widespread protection.
- An effective vaccine against COVID-19 is another tool in our toolkit and another layer of prevention.
- We need to keep doing the basics because these stop COVID-19 and other diseases too.
- To protect yourself from COVID-19, avoid touching your face and keep your distance (two metres/six feet) from people outside of your household, and wear a mask when you can't maintain that distance (e.g., in a store or transit bus). Stay home when you feel sick, and cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.

### **Where can I go if I have other questions about the vaccine?**

- BCCDC: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/covid-19-vaccine>
- Immunize BC: [\(immunizebc.ca/\)](http://immunizebc.ca/)
- 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, please 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. Or submit questions online at ImmunizeBC by visiting the Ask Us section of their website: <https://immunizebc.ca/ask-us>.

**The FNHA will be able to offer a vaccine to every BC First Nations person who wants one, in time, recognizing the vaccine distribution is rolling out according to supply, logistics and other factors. We are working to protect the most at-risk individuals and communities first. We are looking forward to a time when we can safely gather together again. Until that time, we need to do all we can to keep ourselves and our communities safe by avoiding social gatherings, socializing only with immediate household bubbles and following public health guidance such as physical distancing, washing your hands regularly and wearing a mask.**



First Nations Health Authority  
Health through wellness