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

For information about vaccination clinics, please see FAQ questions 4 to 6.

1. What is the COVID-19 vaccine?
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5. I am a First Nations person living away from my home community (i.e., off-reserve). When and where can I receive the COVID-19 vaccine?
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12. Is the COVID-19 vaccine available to youth under the age of 18?
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(Updated Aug. 11, 2021)
1. **WHAT IS THE COVID-19 VACCINE?**
Vaccines are products that produce immunity to a specific disease, such as COVID-19. When you have immunity to COVID-19, which is a serious and sometimes fatal disease, it means you may be exposed to it without developing 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.

Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna are the two vaccines being used in the vast majority of clinics.

2. **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO GET A COVID-19 VACCINATION?**
The vaccines are the best way to protect you against COVID-19. In clinical trials and after nine months of vaccine distribution throughout the world, evidence overwhelmingly shows that those who received a vaccine were less likely to become sick with COVID-19. Fully vaccinated people are also almost completely protected against severe illness (hospitalization and death), which is the main purpose of getting a vaccine.

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 13). 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.

All people in BC age 12 and older are eligible to receive a vaccine. The FNHA’s Medical Officers strongly recommend that you opt to get the vaccine when offered one.

3. **WHICH VACCINE BRAND WILL I GET?**
All of the vaccines available in Canada are effective, safe, and have passed all of Canada’s rigorous standards for testing.

Clinics in First Nations communities, Indigenous-specific vaccine clinics and provincial clinics provide mRNA vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna). In some cases, the same brand of vaccine will be offered for your second dose, although, depending on availability, the alternate mRNA vaccine will be offered. These vaccines are interchangeable, so there is no worry with “mixing and matching” doses. An mRNA vaccine is also recommended as a second dose for anyone who received AstraZeneca as a first dose.

Youth age 12 to 17 will receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine as this is the only vaccine currently approved for use in this age group. Even if your Elders received a different vaccine, you can be assured that you are receiving the same excellent protection.

As only one kind of vaccine is usually offered at each clinic, you will not be able to request a specific vaccine brand when visiting your appointment.
4. WHAT IS THE VACCINE PLAN FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN BC?
There are two methods by which Indigenous people in BC are able to receive vaccination:

1. The province is offering mass vaccination clinics, and this is usually the best option for people who live away from home (off-reserve). Some of these clinics are specifically for Indigenous people. These clinics will soon be discontinued, but drop-in clinics are widely available.

2. The FNHA is working with First Nations communities to offer community clinics. While intended for those who live on reserve, some can serve members who live off-reserve but nearby.

A First Nations person who received their first dose in community and wishes to receive their second dose through the provincial program or via a pharmacy may do so. It is recommended that the vaccine brand is the same as the first dose. In addition, a First Nations person who received their first dose through the provincial program may receive their second dose through a First Nations community clinic.

All people in BC age 12 or older may register for a COVID-19 vaccination appointment as part of the province's vaccination program. There are also drop-in clinics available (see below).

Families and household units can also now be vaccinated together at one appointment, providing additional flexibility and accessibility for vaccinations. This includes parents or guardians bringing more than one child to a new or existing appointment for another member of the family. Youth do not need to be accompanied by a parent or guardian to receive the vaccine. (See FAQ 12.)

There are two ways to get vaccinated:

1. You can register online at: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/getvaccinated.html
2. You can look for drop-in clinics in your area: https://www.gov.bc.ca/VaxForBC

In order to register online, you must provide your first and last name, date of birth, postal code, your Personal Health Number (PHN isn't mandatory if you don't have one) 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 from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., every day, with reduced hours on statutory holidays. Dial 711 if you are hearing-impaired.

6. HOW WILL COMMUNITIES BE NOTIFIED THAT THEY WILL BE RECEIVING THE VACCINE?
Community leaders and First Nations health clinics will receive official confirmation from the FNHA 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.

Some things individuals can do to be ready for when vaccine is available in their communities:

- Talk to your health care provider if you have any concerns about allergies, 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 12 and over is offered immunization. Many first and second dose clinics have been held in First Nations communities, however more clinics may be held for people who missed receiving their first or second doses, including for youth between 12 and 17.

7. **ARE COVID-19 VACCINES SAFE?**

After the distribution of millions of COVID-19 vaccines across Canada and around the world, there is strong evidence that they are safe and highly effective across different ages (including Elders and youth 12 and up), sex, race and ethnicity.

Feeling worried or hesitant is normal when something is new, however it's important to realize that Canada's vaccine approval process (shown in [this infographic](#)) is among the most rigorous in the world. While Health Canada approved the COVID-19 vaccines quickly, no safety standards were changed or compromised for reviews and approvals. The manufacturing of mRNA vaccines has fewer steps, which shortens the length of time required to receive regulatory approval. Pfizer and Moderna used technology that scientists have spent more than 20 years developing in creating effective COVID-19 vaccines. We can feel assured that the COVID-19 vaccines approved for use in Canada are safe, effective and that they will prevent serious illness and death.

To ensure the continued safe delivery of vaccine programs, Health Canada and others around the world continually monitor and investigate potential side effects from vaccines, even long after approval of the vaccine. Public Health officials assess the risks and benefits of a particular vaccine for the population they serve and decide whether to recommend its use.

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

8. **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 to moderate 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.
An inflammation of the heart called myocarditis or pericarditis can happen rarely in the first week after receiving an mRNA vaccine, mostly in young men and youth, and occurring more frequently following the second dose. Cases are generally very mild and resolve on their own. As COVID-19 is far more serious than the possible risk of myocarditis or pericarditis it is still strongly recommended to get the vaccine. As always, if you have a symptom that is unexpected after receiving a vaccine you should seek health care.

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

9. 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 vaccinated 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 for the full isolation period before getting the vaccine so that you do not expose people at your vaccination clinic to the virus.

10. 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.

Do not go to the clinic, but instead contact your health care provider to discuss arrangements. You must be exhibiting no symptoms and will be asked to have a symptom check immediately prior to vaccination.

11. 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-19 outweighs the potential risk of being vaccinated during pregnancy.

Review this infographic about COVID-19 Vaccines and Your Baby.

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding and have questions about the vaccine, please contact your health care provider, or call HealthLinkBC at 811 or the First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day at 1-855-344-3800.

12. IS THE COVID-19 VACCINE AVAILABLE TO YOUTH UNDER THE AGE OF 18?
All people in BC age 12 and older are now eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. Currently, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is the only one authorized for use in people age 12 to 17.

Families and household units can now be vaccinated together at one appointment. This includes parents or guardians bringing more than one child to an existing appointment for another child in the family or to their own appointment.

Youth 12 years and older who are able to make medical decisions can receive the vaccine without being accompanied by a parent or guardian. Under the Infants Act, children can consent to receive medical treatment—including vaccinations—as long as the youth understands the details of the
treatment, including risks and benefits, and a health care provider has determined that the treatment is in the youth's best interest. We recommend parents and guardians discuss getting the vaccine with their children to help them make their decision.

Vaccines for children under age 12 are not yet authorized in Canada, but we expect the mRNA vaccines will be approved and available for children aged five to 11 by late fall or early winter.

Although children do not usually get severe COVID-19 infections, they can still get sick from the virus and may also spread the infection to others. The more people in a household who are vaccinated, the more protected unvaccinated people—like children—will be. Children above two years of age will also benefit from wearing a mask in all indoor public settings, as is recommended for all residents of BC by the Provincial Health Officer during Step 3 of the Restart Plan.

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.

13. WHAT ARE VARIANTS AND DOES THE VACCINE WORK ON THEM?

A variant is a strain of the COVID-19 virus that has mutated from the original one. The main variants currently of concern in BC are the Alpha, Delta and Gamma. They spread more easily and cause more severe illness than the original virus.

The Delta variant spreads more easily and may lead to more severe disease. Delta has been found in people in BC. The variant is being monitored closely in Canada.

Two doses of COVID-19 vaccine provide very good protection against the Delta variant, especially preventing against severe outcomes. A recent study from Ontario found that both mRNA vaccines provide similar effective protection against Delta.

It is important to get the second dose to have strong protection and to reduce the seriousness of any infection that may occur.

14. DO I NEED THE SECOND DOSE?

It is important to get both doses of the vaccine as the two doses make up what's known as one “primary series” that will provide the strongest and longest possible protection, both against the original virus and the variants. The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines require two doses to complete the primary series.

You should not be concerned if you are offered a different brand of vaccine than your first vaccine. It has been determined that this method is safe and effective and all vaccines provide excellent protection against serious disease.

If you are offered a vaccine that is different from your first dose and you do not want that brand, you have the option of cancelling your appointment and rebooking at a later date. However, this is discouraged as there is no assurance your preferred vaccine will be available.

Those who received a first dose of AstraZeneca vaccine will be offered an mRNA vaccine—most likely Moderna—for their second dose. This has likewise been shown to be safe and effective.
15. **WHEN DO I NEED TO RECEIVE THE SECOND DOSE OF THE VACCINE?**

Some people who live in high-transmission zones such as the Interior, or who work in high-risk industries—such as the restaurant and hospitality industry—are being invited to get their second dose 28 days after the first dose. For others, the second dose may be administered up to 49 days after the first dose.

Those who received their first dose through the provincial registration system will be notified when it is time to get their second dose. If you received your first dose in a provincial clinic prior to the April 1 online registration system, you may need to register. You may also find drop-in clinics near you by visiting [https://www.gov.bc.ca/VaxForBC](https://www.gov.bc.ca/VaxForBC).

Scientists are still studying how long the primary series of COVID-19 vaccines remain effective in preventing COVID-19 and whether we will need booster doses later to keep this protection high.

16. **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, including children, would need to be immune to ensure community immunity.

BC's Restart plan was launched on May 25, 2021 as a four step process focused on protecting people and safely getting life back to pre-pandemic routines. We are currently in Step 3 of the plan.

**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 client-specific 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.

If you are a COVID-19 vaccine provider and have clinical COVID-19 or other immunization program questions, you can contact the FNHA Immunization team at [immunize@fnha.ca](mailto:immunize@fnha.ca).

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](https://www.gov.bc.ca/VaxForBC). You can also check our news section for informative articles written by the FNHA’s Medical Officers.