COVID-19 Vaccination Program

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Last updated: May 12, 2021

Vaccines save lives by protecting people from infections that can cause severe illness and even death. If enough people get vaccinated, immunizations also protect communities by making it difficult for diseases – like COVID-19 – to spread. Not only will this protect people, the vaccine will also help us to reach herd immunity so that we can get back to our regular activities. When the vaccine becomes available to you, we encourage you to get immunized to protect yourself from COVID-19.

All PHSA staff should make sure they are registered on getvaccinated.gov.bc.ca. This platform will issue invitations for both first and second dose vaccinations and may also be used for additional communication down the road.

These FAQs include:
- General COVID-19 vaccine information (p. 1 – 2)
- Vaccine clinics (p. 3)
- After vaccination (p. 4)

General COVID-19 vaccine information

Vaccines help your body develop immunity so that if you get exposed to COVID-19 you will not become sick. You cannot get COVID-19 from the vaccine.

The COVID-19 vaccines that are being used in B.C. have been approved by Health Canada. Qualified immunizers administer the vaccine into the muscle of your arm.

For more information, read the BCCDC Vaccination at a Glance or ImmunizeBC’s How Vaccines Work.

1. Is the vaccine safe?
   The COVID-19 vaccines that have been approved by Health Canada are safe, effective and will save lives. Once a vaccine is approved and in use, vaccine safety is continuously monitored to identify rare side effects. Canada has one of the most rigorous regulatory systems to authorize new vaccines for use. Health Canada approval ensures that:
   - Laboratory and clinical studies provide evidence that the vaccine is safe and effective
   - The manufacturing process and the vaccine meet the highest standards of quality
   - During development, vaccines are first tested in animals before testing in humans. Testing in humans is done over three phases of clinical trials. These clinical trials provide crucial information on vaccine safety and effectiveness.
   Read more from the BCCDC about the vaccine approval process.

2. Am I required to get vaccinated?
   While recommended, it is not mandatory for staff to receive the vaccine. Feeling worried or hesitant is completely normal when something is new. We can be assured that Health Canada has a thorough approval process that ensures the safety of the many vaccines and medicines we take routinely. This rigorous process is used before any vaccines are approved for use in Canada.

3. Who should not receive the vaccine?
   The following individuals should not receive the vaccine at this time:
   - Those who have a serious, life-threatening allergy to polyethylene glycol (PEG)
   - Those who have had a life-threatening reaction to a previous dose of the COVID-19 vaccine or to any other part of the vaccine
• Those who have received a monoclonal antibody or plasma for treatment or prevention of COVID-19
• Those who have COVID-19 at time of vaccination.
If you have a specific medical condition or you are immunocompromised, you may wish to consult with your family doctor or medical specialist.

4. Should I get vaccinated if I have had COVID-19 in the past?
If you have previously had COVID-19, you should still get vaccinated. However, you should wait until you have recovered to get immunized.

5. If I am pregnant or breastfeeding, should I get the vaccine?
The Canadian Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology (SOGC), the National Advisory Committee on Immunization and public health experts in B.C. all advise that pregnant and breastfeeding women can be offered the vaccine. If you have questions, and you are pregnant, planning to become pregnant or are breastfeeding, we encourage you to speak to your health care provider about COVID-19 vaccines. You can find more information about getting the vaccine if you are pregnant on the BCCDC website.

6. How well will the vaccine protect me?
All vaccines that have been approved by Health Canada are highly effective at preventing serious illness and death. It generally takes three weeks for your body’s immune system to respond so the protection is not immediate. Even though the vaccine rollout is well underway, it’s important to remember we are still learning about whether or not someone who has been immunized can still transmit the virus to others. Because of that, it is critically important that we continue to protect each other, and ourselves, by following public health orders and adhering to PPE policies, even if we have been vaccinated.

7. What can I tell my patients/clients about the COVID-19 vaccine?
Please refer your patients/clients to the BCCDC website for more information. There are also details for specific populations, such as cancer, maternity, pediatric and mental health patients/clients, available on the respective PHSA program websites. The B.C. government website also has information for the clinically extremely vulnerable populations.

8. How are we making sure that no vaccine goes to waste in B.C.?
As with any immunization program, wastage is being tracked. Our qualified immunizers are focused on using every available dose of the vaccine to help protect those most at risk of transmitting or contracting COVID-19. Once a frozen vial of COVID-19 vaccine has been thawed and reconstituted, it must be used within 6-8 hours.

9. Can I choose which brand of vaccine I get?
If you have the opportunity to get any approved vaccine for COVID-19, we encourage you to take it. Though studies are underway, at the moment we don’t have information on the interchangeability of the COVID-19 vaccines, so it is recommended individuals complete their vaccine series with the same vaccine product (i.e. don’t “mix and match” vaccines). However, if it is not possible to determine what product was used for the first dose, or if the same product is unavailable, the second dose of a mRNA (messenger RNA vaccine) may be given with an available mRNA product.

10. Is the vaccine free?
Yes. The vaccine will be free for all British Columbians (and all Canadians).
Vaccine clinics

PHSA is working collaboratively with the regional health authorities to ensure staff have access to healthcare worker and public immunization vaccine clinics.

Do not go to a vaccination clinic if you are feeling unwell or if during the past 14 days:
- You have developed symptoms of COVID-19 such as cough, fever, chills, muscle pain, shortness of breath, sore throat, nausea and vomiting, headache, fatigue, runny nose, diarrhea or new loss of taste or smell
- You have been identified as a close contact of someone who has COVID-19
- You have been asked by Public Health to self-isolate

1. **How will I be notified when it’s my turn to be vaccinated?**
   As we transition from the health-care worker clinics to the general public immunization clinics, everyone is being asked to go to getvaccinated.gov.bc.ca to register. Through this website, you will be invited for your first dose and for our second dose, once you are eligible.

2. **I work in a clinical setting and have not received my first dose – can I get vaccinated now?**
   If you have not already received your first dose of vaccine but you are a health-care worker in a hospital or community setting, please call the provincial immunization call centre at 1-833-838-2323. The phone line is open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., seven days a week.

   Let the booking line agent know you are a health-care worker in a hospital or community setting, whichever is applicable in your case. All health-care workers who work in clinical settings are eligible to receive the vaccine, regardless of age.

3. **When will I get my second dose?**
   Effective March 1, 2021, the time between first and second dose has been extended to 16 weeks. This allows a greater number of people to receive a first dose of vaccine, given limited vaccine supply, and will have the greatest impact on reducing mortality, severe disease, and hospitalizations from COVID-19. For more information on the second dose intervals, please visit the BCCDC website.

4. **How will you track who has received the vaccine and when they need to return for a second dose?**
   Your COVID-19 vaccination status is attached to your Personal Health Number (PHN). The provincial system – getvaccinated.gov.bc.ca – is able to connect your PHN with your eligibility for your first dose (if you have not yet received it) and your eligibility for your second dose. The system will send you invitations to book based on your preferred contact information. Regardless of where you received your first dose, ensure you are registered at getvaccinated.gov.bc.ca.

   A record of your COVID-19 immunization will also be available online through Health Gateway. Health Gateway can be accessed from your computer, tablet or mobile phone using your Mobile Card. You can also download the CANImmunize app to keep track of your COVID-19 vaccine and other vaccines.

5. **What happens if I cannot get my second dose at the designated time?**
   Your first dose will provide good protection in the short term. However, for long lasting protection it’s important that you get both doses. At this time, B.C. has determined that administering the first doses of vaccine to as many people as possible in alignment with the priority groups, when doses are limited, will protect the greatest number of at-risk people in the shortest possible time. This will have the greatest impact on reducing mortality, severe disease, and hospitalizations from COVID-19.

   If you are unable to get your second dose during the designated timeframe because you are ill, please contact the provincial immunization call centre for direction at 1-833-838-2323.
6. Can I get time off work to get vaccinated?
The B.C. government has introduced amendments to the Employment Standards Act to provide staff with a paid leave of up to three hours to be vaccinated against COVID-19. This amendment ensures that no employee will lose pay if they need time away from scheduled work to get vaccinated. This applies to both full-time and part-time employees. For more information on coding and the effective dates for this change, visit the Timekeeping & Scheduling section of the PHSA website.

Due to the nature of our work, not all staff will require leave to get their COVID-19 vaccination, including if appointments are made outside of work hours.

This leave does not apply to staff assisting family members to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. Staff who need time off work to assist a dependent or family member remain eligible for an unpaid leave of absence.

While the Employment Standards Act does not apply to salaried physicians, PHSA strongly believes in the importance of COVID-19 vaccines and will be making paid vaccination leave available to all PHSA salaried physicians. Physicians who are engaged as independent contractors or on a fee-for-service basis will be treated in the same manner as non-physician independent contractors of PHSA, who are not eligible for this leave.

After vaccination

At this point, even once you’ve had the vaccine, you must still abide by the Provincial Health Officer orders and guidelines. It’s also important that you continue to practice the public health measures that we’ve grown accustomed to: maintain your distance, wear the appropriate PPE, clean your hands regularly and stay home if you are feeling unwell.

After you receive your vaccination, please plan to stay on site for 15 minutes to ensure you experience no adverse effects, such as an allergic reaction. Review the BCCDC COVID-19 vaccine after-care sheet.

Important note: Avoid getting any other vaccines until you have received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine and at least 28 days have passed after the second dose. If you did get a vaccine during this time, you don’t need to worry. Avoiding other vaccines is recommended only to help your provider understand the cause of any potential side effects.

1. What are the common side effects?
   Common expected side effects within a day or two after getting the vaccine may include:
   - Pain or swelling where the vaccine was given. A cool, damp cloth or wrapped ice pack where the vaccine was given may help.
   - Tiredness, headache, fever, chills, muscle or joint soreness, nausea and vomiting.
   These side effects will go away on their own; however you may feel unwell for a day or two. If you are unable to carry on with your regular activities because of these symptoms, you can take medication such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Check with your health care provider if you need advice about medication.

2. What should I do if I experience a side effect?
   While mild side effects are expected, if you experience any unusual, persistent or serious side effects, you should call 8-1-1 or your family doctor. If you develop symptoms of COVID-19 after vaccination, you should stay home from work and use the COVID-19 self-assessment tool to determine if testing is required. As usual, notify your supervisor and code your time appropriately. While the vaccine is very effective, if you were unknowingly infected with COVID-19 in the days before your vaccination, you may develop symptoms afterwards.
3. Once vaccinated, can I still transmit the virus to others, even if I don’t get sick?
   At the moment, we do not have enough information about this issue. We don’t know how long the protection lasts from COVID-19 vaccines or how well they work in preventing asymptomatic infection or reducing transmission of the virus. Therefore, PPE is required for immunized individuals as it may be possible to transmit the COVID-19 virus even after vaccination. Individuals must also continue to follow the other public health measures.

4. When will the vaccine start to protect me?
   It will take about three weeks after a getting the first dose of the vaccine to build immunity to the virus. If you are exposed to someone with COVID-19 infection during this time or shortly before getting the vaccine you can get sick with COVID-19. However, you must continue to abide by the Provincial Health Officer’s orders and you should follow public health recommendations such as cleaning your hands regularly, wearing the appropriate PPE, staying at least two-metres from others whenever possible and staying home if you feel unwell.

5. Do I have to continue wearing PPE after I’m vaccinated?
   Recipients of the vaccine must continue to follow all infection prevention and control guidelines while at work as it is not possible or practical to check every staff member’s vaccination status while at work. Vaccination is very effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19. Although it is not likely, it is still possible that vaccine recipients can acquire the virus without symptoms and transmit it to others. Until more people are protected and there is more data available, people must continue to follow all PPE protocols while at work.

6. Once I get vaccinated, how long do I have to adhere to physical distancing and other measures?
   Provincial orders/guidelines remain in place for everyone, regardless of whether they have been vaccinated. After immunizations begin, it will still be important to clean your hands regularly, maintain physical distance, wear a mask and stay home when sick. These layers of protection are still essential as vaccines roll out.

7. Once I get vaccinated, can I travel? Will I still have to self-isolate after international travel?
   At this point, federal and provincial orders/guidelines remain in place for everyone, regardless of whether they have been vaccinated. You can view PHSA’s travel guidelines on SHOP.

8. Once I get vaccinated, do I need to start going back to the office if I’ve been working remotely?
   No. However, PHSA’s workplaces are safe so that all those who want to, or need to, come back to the office are able to do so. Please continue to discuss your individual work situation with your supervisor and refer to PHSA’s flexible work options policy.

9. Does the single site order still apply to me once I’ve been vaccinated?
   Yes, at this point, all of the provincial orders continue to apply to all British Columbians.

10. Can I share my vaccination experience on social media?
    The vaccination program is exciting news and PHSA welcomes its employees and physicians to share their experience on social media if:
    - **You do not impede the clinic’s operations.** Please ensure you are not slowing down others from getting their vaccination. If you are going to post, please do so after your vaccination, once you are outside of the clinic.
    - **You respect the privacy of those around you.** As per our social media policies, you must not post pictures where other people can be identified without their permission.
    - **You post respectfully and thoughtfully.** Remember, many people in B.C. are very eager to get the vaccine. At this point, we encourage you to include in your posts the type of health care worker that you are to help people understand that you are in a priority group as identified by the Provincial Health Officer. (Feel free to tag us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn)
Other resources:

BCCDC COVID-19 vaccine
Immunize BC
Government of BC COVID-19 vaccines