COVID-19 Vaccination Program
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
Last updated: March 10, 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.

There are now vaccines for COVID-19 that have been approved for use in Canada. The provincial vaccine campaign is underway, and priority groups are receiving vaccines first. Our current vaccine supply is relatively limited, but will increase over time and the vaccine will be available to all British Columbians who want it. When the vaccine becomes available to you, we encourage you to get immunized to protect yourself from COVID-19.

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. The COVID-19 vaccines that have been approved by Health Canada are given as a two-dose series. Qualified immunizers administer the vaccine into the muscle of your arm.

The COVID-19 vaccine is a new type of vaccine that uses messenger RNA (or, mRNA, which is the genetic code for a capsule protein of the virus) to help our bodies make protection against the virus. You cannot get COVID-19 from the vaccine.

The COVID-19 vaccine will be free for everyone in British Columbia (and in Canada).

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, please 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, reinfection within three months after a laboratory confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis has not been documented, and you may wish to defer your immunization until a later date e.g., three months after your illness.

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.

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 two to 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.

8. How are we making sure that no vaccine goes to waste in B.C.?
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. This means that operations leaders at each vaccination clinic site may identify additional staff in priority populations who can be called upon to receive any doses still remaining at the end of each day. As with any immunization program, wastage is being tracked.

9. Can I choose which brand of vaccine I get?
If you have the opportunity to get either vaccine for COVID-19, we encourage you to take it. Most individuals cannot choose which brand you receive at this point, but both vaccines are similarly highly effective. It is recommended individuals complete their vaccine series with the same vaccine product (i.e. don’t “mix and match” vaccines).

10. Can I use a different brand of vaccine for my second dose?
No. Though studies are underway, at the moment we don’t have information on the interchangeability of the COVID-19 vaccines. It is recommended that you complete the vaccine series with the same COVID-19 vaccine product.

11. Will the vaccine still work if the virus mutates?
At this time, the virus has mutated a bit, but these small changes are not affecting how well the vaccine works. However, B.C. is watching this closely and may update vaccine programs, as necessary.
12. Is the vaccine free?
   Yes. The vaccine will be free for all British Columbians (and all Canadians).

Vaccine sequencing

The Provincial Health Officer has outlined a number of priority groups who will receive the vaccine first, based on risk of severe disease and transmission. Regional health authorities are responsible for the distribution of vaccine in their respective regions, based on the priority groups, as well as the local risk levels and epidemiology. Since PHSA has employees across all regions, we are working collaboratively with regional health authorities to ensure all of our workforce – starting with the priority groups – have access to vaccine clinics.

The timeframe for vaccinations of each health profession will depend upon many factors, such as supply, the priority groups outlined by the Provincial Health Officer, ethical considerations and local/regional epidemiology.

1. **When will I get vaccinated?**
   Immunization will be provided in phases, starting with priority groups. These groups have been identified based on recommendations from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and on our own epidemiological data in B.C. to reduce the risk of infection to those most vulnerable to severe disease and death from COVID-19 infection, and to protect our health-care system.

   More vaccine arrives every week. You can be assured that everyone who wants to be vaccinated will have the opportunity, as soon as the supply becomes available.

2. **Why am I seeing staff who are not within one of the priority groups get vaccinated?**
   Once a frozen vial of COVID-19 vaccine has been thawed and reconstituted, it must be used within 6-8 hours. We do not want to waste any vaccine. This means that operations leaders at each vaccination clinic site may identify additional staff who can be called upon to receive any doses still remaining at the end of each day.

   Additionally, there may be decisions to offer vaccine to people outside of the priority groups due to the local risk level (e.g. places where an outbreak has occurred). We thank you for your patience and for continuing to practice all of the infection prevention measures we have grown accustomed to so we can keep our colleagues, patients and families safe.

3. **How are the priority groups being further defined?**
   Because vaccine shipments are arriving in limited quantities each week, it may be necessary to further prioritize among the priority groups established by the provincial health officer.

   Regional health authorities – working with PHSA – will look at things like history of transmission, clusters and outbreaks in a sector or population.

4. **Are clinics validating that people are not jumping the queue?**
   Yes, clinics are validating eligibility.
Vaccine clinics

In many cases, PHSA employees and medical staff will be invited to attend clinics managed by a regional health authority. PHSA will also run some of its own clinics.

PHSA is working collaboratively with the regional health authorities to identify and invite PHSA staff and medical staff, based on the priority groups, to vaccine clinics. More information and booking options will be shared directly with those who have been identified. Masks are required at all 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?
   Depending on which health region is delivering the vaccination clinic, you may receive an invitation by email, phone, text, or you may be invited to call a booking phone number. At some times, you may also hear directly from your manager, supervisor, medical department head, or director of care. Please ensure your contact information is up to date with current email address and phone number.

   If you work in a corporate, research or administrative setting, For staff in administrative, corporate or research roles who generally do not interact with patients/clients or are not based regularly at facilities where there are patients/clients on-site, please assume that you will need to register to be immunized as part of the age-based cohorts referenced below.

2. Where will I be able to get the vaccine?
   There will be a number of locations set up for staff to get COVID-19 vaccinations. When you have been notified that it is your time to be vaccinated, you will receive more detailed information about the clinic location, times, and what to expect.

3. Can I make an appointment?
   Appointment booking systems have been set up by the regional health authorities for their vaccine clinics. Once identified as part of a priority group, you will be contacted regarding clinic times and locations. For staff in administrative, corporate or research roles who generally do not interact with patients/clients or are not based regularly at facilities where there are patients/clients on-site, please assume that you will need to register to be immunized as part of the age-based cohorts referenced below.

4. Can I bring my family members?
   No, not at this time. Vaccine is being administered through a phased approach, starting with priority groups. Sequencing of these groups is based on recommendations from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and on our own epidemiological data in B.C. to reduce the risk of infection to those most vulnerable to severe disease and death following COVID-19 infection, and to protect our health-care system.

   As more vaccine supply comes available, the vaccine will be available to every British Columbian who wants to be immunized. Your family members will be able to access vaccine clinics based on the prioritization framework and their age cohort.

5. Can I go to my family doctor for a vaccination?
   Not at this time.
6. **When will I get my second dose?**

   Effective March 1, 2021, the time between first and second dose has been extended to 16 weeks.

   Using experience from other vaccinations, COVID-19 clinical trial data, modelling from BCCDC, and the COVID-19 Ethical Decision-Making Framework, B.C. determined that administering the first doses of vaccine to as many people as possible in the priority groups 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.

   There is good evidence that on the short term, one dose of the vaccine protects as well as two doses. A second dose ensures longer lasting protection. In general, extending the time between first and second doses does not reduce vaccine protection over the long term.

   This allows a greater number of people to receive a first dose of vaccine, given limited vaccine supply currently and high rates of COVID-19 transmission.

7. **How will you track who has received the vaccine and when they need to return for a second dose?**

   Public Health is tracking who has received vaccine, which kind was administered, and when people will be invited to receive their second dose. You can help by making a note of your own dates and details, and by being ready and bringing proof of your first vaccination to the clinic when it’s time for your second vaccination.

   A record of your COVID-19 immunization will 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. (Note: It may take up to a few hours for your account to be activated, so be sure to do this in advance of attending a clinic for your second dose).

8. **Do I need to get my second dose in the same location as the first?**

   Your second dose may be in a different location. However, it’s important that you use the same brand of vaccine for both doses in the two-dose series.

9. **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 PHSA’s COVID-19 Resource Line (1-833-875-2155) for guidance.

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### 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, these should be reported to workplace health (PHSA COVID-19 Resource Line at 1-833-875-2155) or to your local public health unit. If you develop symptoms of COVID-19 after vaccination, you should stay home from work and use the COVID-19 self-assessment tool, contact your health care provider or call 811 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 two 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!)

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**Other resources:**

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