

**Updated: December 22, 2020**

The following are questions and answers for the COVID-19 Immunization program. This document will be added to/updated as information becomes available.

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## VACCINE FACTS

### 1. Are the vaccines safe?

Health Canada reviews product safety data for all vaccines and drugs approved for use in Canada. They use rigorous analysis and testing to ensure both efficacy and safety. Health Canada completed a thorough, independent review of the evidence on the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, and Health Canada has determined that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine meets the stringent safety, efficacy and quality requirements for use in Canada.

Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada will continue to monitor vaccine safety, efficacy and quality. Read a [summary of the evidence and documents](#) related to the decision.

### 2. Why immunize for COVID-19?

The goal of immunizing for COVID-19 is to minimize serious illness and overall deaths while minimizing societal disruption as a result of the pandemic.

### 3. How does it work?

Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna developed mRNA vaccines. mRNA vaccines teach our cells how to make a protein that will trigger an immune response without using the live virus that causes COVID-19. Once triggered, our body then makes antibodies. These antibodies protect us from being infected if the real virus does enter our body in the future.

'RNA' stands for ribonucleic acid, which is a molecule that provides cells with instructions for making proteins. Messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines contain the genetic instructions for making the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein. This protein is found on the surface of the virus that causes COVID-19.

When a person is given the vaccine, their cells will read the genetic instructions like a recipe and produce the spike protein. After the protein piece is made, the cell breaks down the instructions and gets rid of them. The cell then displays the protein piece on its surface. Our immune system recognizes that the protein doesn't belong there and begins building an immune response and making antibodies.

#### 4. How are the vaccines kept cold?

Wireless temperature monitoring will ensure all vaccine fridges maintain the required temperatures. The cold storage must meet monitoring and reporting regulations as required by the CDC, BCCDC and College of Pharmacists. Read more:

- [BC Pharmacists Cold Chain Management, accessed Dec 3, 2020](#)
- [BCCDC Biological management, accessed Dec 3, 2020](#)

## IMMUNIZATION PLAN

#### 5. Who can get immunized?

The COVID-19 vaccine will be free for everyone in BC, but will not be available to everyone right away. Vaccines will initially be available at locations across the Island Health region for priority populations, as identified by the Province, such as health-care workers in long-term care facilities and those on the frontline of the COVID-19 response (i.e. cohort units, ICU's, EDs).

There may be times when you hear of a colleague who is not a part of the priority schedule, yet they were called to receive a vaccine. It is important to note that we do not waste vaccine. If there is extra supply available, we will endeavor to use that on other priority individuals. This will be done using a list of pre-identified people or areas to target if need be.

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is initially approved for use in people aged 16 and older (see [Health Canada news release Dec 9](#)). For detailed information on eligibility and side effects, see the [HealthFile COVID-19 mRNA vaccine](#).

#### 6. How soon do I need the second dose?

Both Pfizer and Moderna vaccine products require two doses for the series. You will be informed regarding the timing of the second dose by a public health professional.

#### 7. Will it be mandated for all IH employees to get a COVID vaccination and if so, what will be the deadline?

At this time, the Ministry of Health has not made a determination if this will be mandated for health care professionals. That determination will be made by the province.

## 8. Why was Victoria chosen as the first geographic location for vaccines?

Many factors were considered when choosing the first site for COVID-19 vaccine distribution. The initial vaccine must be stored at extremely cold temperatures and is not easily transported. That means people receiving immunizations must travel to the immunization site.

Island Health carefully evaluated the risk of transmission in each long-term care facility. Risk was determined based on a number of criteria including: multi-bed rooms and other infrastructure characteristics, outbreak history, the proximity of the care home to the vaccine distribution location, as well as ethical considerations. Based on this evaluation, the long-term care facilities in the Island Health region have been prioritized by risk. As a result, the first vaccines will be provided to long-term care staff in the Greater Victoria region.

## 9. When will vaccines be available for the general public?

Island Health is not booking COVID-19 immunization appointments for the general public at this time. Everyone in B.C. for whom the vaccine is recommended will have the opportunity to be vaccinated for free by the end of 2021. Read more about [B.C.'s plan for vaccine distribution](#).

## AFTER THE VACCINE

## 10. After being vaccinated (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> dose), when should a person be tested for COVID-19?

After the vaccine, if you experience symptoms such as: tiredness, headache, muscle pain, joint pain, chills or fever *AND* you are working at a facility with an outbreak, do not go to work, get tested and self isolate until your test results are back. If your test is negative, you can return to work. If positive, you will be contacted by public health. Read more about [after-vaccine care](#).

Use the [BC COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#) to help determine if further assessment or testing is needed. If a test is recommended, Health-care professionals can call: 1-833-737-9377 – 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Family members and others can call: 1-844-901-8442 – 8:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

## 11. Once vaccinated, is a person still required to follow the COVID safety measures?

Yes, staff must continue to practice public health measures for the prevention of COVID-19 infection and transmission regardless of vaccination status. Although we now have a safe and effective vaccine that has been approved for use here in Canada and available in BC, it is not enough to stop transmission in our communities at this time. We need to continue to follow public health measures, including frequent hand washing, maintaining physical distance, avoiding non-essential travel, wearing a mask in indoor public spaces, and staying home when sick.

## 12. Will Island Health's mask policy – and the Provincial policy for the public – still be in effect for people who are vaccinated?

Yes. The masking order is determined provincially and any changes to current orders will be shared by the Provincial Health Officer.

## COVID-19 GENETIC VARIANTS

### **13. What do we know about the new genetic variant of the virus that has emerged in the last few days in the United Kingdom?**

We have seen variations from the very beginning with this virus. It does mutate, as we expect, with RNA viruses. COVID mutates relatively slowly. We saw slight differences in cases from Washington State, Iran and China. What has arisen in the UK is a new variant that has as many as 17 different mutations or changes in parts of the virus. The evidence has shown that so far, it does not seem to increase the severity of illness, however, it does seem to mean that the virus can transmit more easily. That is something we are still trying to understand and figure out. It could be that one of the changes or mutations makes the virus more able to easily attach to the receptors that allow the virus to get into our bodies and start the infectious process. Scientists are looking at that very carefully to see if there are any other changes this virus mutation will enable as well.

### **14. Have there been any cases with the new genetic variant of the virus in Canada?**

Provincial Health Officers across the country are watching this very carefully. The Government put in a travel restriction from the United Kingdom yesterday, stopping all flights until we can get a better handle on what measures we need to take to ensure it doesn't get introduced and spread widely here. In addition, the lab at the BCCDC is reviewing the genome sequencing. From the very beginning we have been looking at the genomic sequence of the virus that we are seeing in BC. To date we have not seen this variant here in BC. We have seen some mutations, particularly when people come from different parts of the world, and we have seen some of the mutations that are part of the 17 changes to the virus in the UK – but we have not seen the strain from the UK in Canada or BC.

## ALLERGIES AND SIDE EFFECTS

### **15. What are the side effects?**

Side effects that follow immunization are mild or moderate. They include pain at the site of injection, body chills, feeling tired and feeling feverish. In most cases, staff can continue with their regular activities, including work.

### **16. How soon do side effects appear and how long do they last?**

After receiving COVID-19 vaccine, some individuals can experience side effects. Side effects can develop in the day or two after receiving the vaccine and should only last a day or two and resolve on their own.

### **17. What are other symptoms that can occur?**

Other symptoms that staff may experience after the receipt of COVID-19 vaccine may include tiredness, headache, muscle pain, joint pain, chills or fever. These side effects are similar to symptoms of COVID-19 infection. Read more [here](#).

**18. What options, with respect to vaccines, will be available for those who have allergies and cannot take the Pfizer vaccine?**

Over time we will be able to better identify which ingredients are contraindicated for which allergy – and which vaccine is best suited. We will be prepared for anaphylaxis at all clinics.

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