



COVID-19 and the Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccine

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is an infection caused by the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). It is mainly spread when a person infected with the virus coughs, sneezes, sings, talks or breathes. People without symptoms can also spread the virus to others.

Symptoms of COVID-19 can be mild to severe and include:

- A cough,
- Shortness of breath
- Fever and chills
- Tiredness
- Loss of smell or taste

In Canada:

- 1 in 13 people with COVID-19 need to be hospitalized.
- 3 out of every 100 people will die from COVID-19.
- People with mild symptoms can feel unwell for a long time after having COVID-19.

COVID-19 vaccinations

There are many different vaccines being developed for COVID-19. The one currently approved by Health Canada is the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

All vaccines work by presenting your body with something that looks like a virus. This allows your immune system to produce natural protection against the virus. This natural protection prevents you from getting sick if you come in contact with the real virus at a later time.

The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine works with your immune system to help keep you from getting COVID-19. It uses a method called messenger RNA (mRNA). The mRNA acts like a code telling the cells in your body to make a piece of the outer lining of the virus. This piece of the virus cannot hurt you, but is enough for your immune system to learn how to recognize and protect you from the virus.

In a large trial where people were given 2 doses of this vaccine, it was shown to work very well. The immunized group of people were 95% less likely to become sick with COVID-19 compared to the group that did not receive the vaccine.

Can people who are immunocompromised receive the COVID-19 vaccine?

Currently, there is not enough information about this. Immunocompromised patients (this includes patients with a weaker immune system caused by a cancer treatment) were not included in the original trials of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Immunocompromised patients are currently being vaccinated in the United Kingdom and the United States. As with the annual flu vaccine, the COVID-19 vaccine does not contain a live virus. You cannot get COVID-19 from the vaccine. For this reason, we expect it to be safe to give it to immunocompromised patients. More information about this is expected very soon.

When will you be able to get the COVID-19 vaccine?

In Ontario, a COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Task Force decides who is eligible to receive the vaccine. On December 7, 2020, a list of who will receive the first vaccines was announced. This includes:

- Residents, employees, staff and essential caregivers of congregate living facilities providing care to seniors. Long term care and retirement homes are congregate living facilities.
- All health care workers and staff in health care settings
- Adults from First Nation, Metis and Inuit populations who are at greater risk
- Adults receiving chronic home health care

The doctor(s) managing your cancer care and treatment do not have access to order or give the COVID-19 vaccine. As more vaccines becomes available in Ontario, more people will be eligible to receive it. The Federal Government has ordered enough vaccines to vaccinate every Canadian. A second vaccine was approved on December 22. We will let you know when we have more information about the availability of the vaccine and where you can get it.

For credible and up-to-date information about COVID-19 vaccines, go to this website:

www.covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-vaccines-ontario

Last reviewed: December 2020