

Ministry of Health

COVID-19 Vaccination Recommendations for Special Populations

Version 8.0 September 29, 2021

Highlights of changes

- New guidance on COVID-19 vaccination for children, adolescents and young adults (Page 7)

This guidance provides basic information only. This document is not intended to provide or take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or legal advice.

- Please check the Ministry of Health (MOH) [COVID-19](#) website regularly for updates to this document, mental health resources, and other information,

This document contains recommendations based upon the best currently available scientific knowledge for COVID-19 vaccination in special populations and expert clinician advice, including as it relates to third doses of COVID-19 vaccines.

To date, the following COVID-19 vaccines have been authorized for use in Canada by Health Canada: Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine (mRNA vaccine), Moderna COVID-19 vaccine (mRNA vaccine), AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine* (viral vector vaccine), COVISHIELD COVID-19 vaccine* (viral vector vaccine), and Janssen COVID-19 vaccine (viral vector vaccine).

*As of May 11, 2021, first dose provision of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine/COVISHIELD vaccine has been paused in Ontario: [Ontario Pauses Administration of AstraZeneca Vaccine | Ontario Newsroom](#).

This evergreen document will be regularly updated as COVID-19 vaccines are authorized for use in Canada, and as evidence on these vaccines evolves. Additional counselling tools to support decision making for special populations will be released as they become available.

Third Doses of COVID-19 vaccines

Guidance for the administration of third doses of COVID-19 vaccines can be found in the [COVID-19 Vaccine Third Dose Recommendations](#) document.

Recommendations for Specific Populations

1. Pregnancy

Recommendation:

All pregnant individuals in the authorized age group are eligible and recommended to be vaccinated as soon as possible, at any stage in pregnancy, as COVID-19 infection during pregnancy can be severe (increased risk for hospitalization, ICU admission, mechanical ventilation and death compared to non-pregnant individuals) and the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks. Vaccination may be considered at any gestational age, including the first trimester. While pregnant individuals were not included in Phase III trials for COVID-19 vaccines, real-world safety data for hundreds of thousands of pregnant individuals that have received COVID-19 vaccines are now available and did not reveal any safety signals.

Tools to support decision making can be found on the Ministry of Health's website:

- [COVID-19 Vaccination: Special Populations - Vaccination in Pregnancy & Breastfeeding Decision-Making Tool](#) for Pregnant Individuals

For additional information consult the [Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination in Pregnancy](#) and the National Advisory Committee on Immunization's (NACI) [Recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccines](#).

2. Breastfeeding

Recommendation:

COVID-19 vaccines can also be safely given to breastfeeding individuals and recent data shows that mRNA from vaccines do not transfer into breast milk. Anti-COVID-19 antibodies produced by the breastfeeding person have been shown to transfer through the milk and provide protection to the infant. The vaccines are safe for the breastfeeding person, and should be offered to those eligible for vaccination.

3. Autoimmune Conditions & Immunocompromised persons (due to disease or treatment)

Recommendation:

Since all Health Canada authorized COVID-19 vaccines are not live vaccines, they are considered safe in these groups, however there is limited data on efficacy. Individuals who were immunocompromised due to disease or treatment were excluded from some of the Phase III trials for COVID-19 vaccines available at present and those with autoimmune conditions had very small representation.

- A. Individuals in the authorized age group with autoimmune conditions, immunodeficiency conditions or those immunosuppressed due to disease or treatment including stem cell therapy, CAR-T therapy, chemotherapy, immune checkpoint inhibitors, monoclonal antibodies (e.g., rituximab) and other targeted agents (e.g., CD4/6 inhibitors, PARP inhibitors etc.) should be offered the vaccine. These individuals **are strongly encouraged to speak with their treating health care provider** regarding the timing of vaccination in relation to therapy for their underlying health condition and/or treatment modification in view of possible decreased vaccine effectiveness with the use of immunosuppressive therapy.
- B. All other individuals in the authorized age group with autoimmune conditions, immunodeficiency conditions or those immunosuppressed due to disease or treatment may choose to receive the vaccine. **These individuals may choose to consult with their health care provider prior to vaccination (for example, to discuss immunosuppressive medication management/timing in relation to their vaccination).**
- For additional information on organ transplantation, consult the [Canadian Society of Transplantation](#) statement on COVID-19 vaccination.
 - For additional information on rheumatology, consult the [Canadian Rheumatology Association statement on COVID-19 vaccination](#).
 - For additional information on inflammatory bowel disease, consult the [Canadian Association of Gastroenterology](#) statement on COVID-19 vaccination.
 - For additional information on immunodeficiency conditions, consult the COVID-19 resources on the [Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology](#) webpage.

- For frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccine and adult cancer patients, consult [Cancer Care Ontario](#).

Public Health Measures

Getting a full series of a COVID-19 vaccine is an important step in protecting this population from COVID-19. The effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines is not yet well understood in those who are immunocompromised and continues to be studied. No vaccine is 100% effective, and reduced effectiveness has been noted for variants. Measures can be taken to enhance protection against COVID-19 for those who are immunocompromised:

- It is recommended that all people with whom the individual regularly comes into close contact (e.g. family, friends) complete a full vaccine series (i.e. “ring vaccination”).
- It is recommended to consider the risks of catching COVID-19 or passing it on to others when meeting with those outside the individual's household. Strategies to reduce the risk include:
 - Meeting outside if possible
 - When meeting inside, ensure the space is well ventilated, for example by opening up windows, doors, or other actions to increase fresh air
 - Limiting the size of the gathering and considering the vaccination status of others that will attend.
- It is recommended that immunocompromised individuals follow Public Health measures that have been shown to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, even after immunization. These recommendations may continue for immunocompromised individuals even after they have been lifted for the general population. This includes mask wearing and physical distancing. A well fitting, well-constructed [non-medical mask](#) that includes a filter layer is recommended, or a [medical mask](#) if one is available.
- Individuals are encouraged to speak with their health care provider as needed to assess the risks in their clinical context.

Serologic Testing

The clinical implications of serological (antibody) testing to assess immune response following immunization are not yet known. Routine antibody testing (i.e. anti-spike protein antibody (IgG) testing) is not recommended as it may create false reassurance of protection, or a false concern of vulnerability.

- **Individual serologic testing should not be used to guide the need for additional doses, including in high-risk populations.**
- There is variability in the type of commercial assays that are used to detect COVID-19 antibodies, some of which do not detect anti-spike protein antibodies (IgG).
- It is currently not known how a COVID-19-specific antibody response correlates with protection against disease. Serological assays alone cannot adequately measure neutralization or T-cell immunity.
- Serology cannot generally be used to determine the individual's COVID-19 vaccination status or serological response to vaccination. Vaccination records are the best method to determine up-to-date vaccination status. See [Public Health Ontario](#) for more information on the indications for serologic testing in Ontario.
- Research is ongoing to establish the right type of test that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the immune response following immunization and guidance will be updated as more is known.

4. Allergies

Recommendation

- Individuals who have had a severe allergic reaction or anaphylaxis to a previous dose of a COVID-19 vaccine or to any of its components should not receive the COVID-19 vaccine in a general vaccine clinic. **An urgent referral to an allergist/immunologist is recommended for these individuals***. Such an assessment is required to assess the method for possible (re)administration of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Individuals who have had an allergic reaction within 4 hours of receiving a previous dose of a COVID-19 vaccine or any components of the COVID-19 vaccine should not receive a COVID-19 vaccine unless they have been **evaluated by an allergist/immunologist*** and it is determined that the person can safely receive the vaccine. The potential allergens included in the vaccine or container include polyethylene glycol (PEG), tromethamine and polysorbate 80.

- Individuals with known or suspected allergies to components of the mRNA vaccines should be referred to an allergist/immunologist for a COVID-19 vaccination assessment. The allergist/immunologist assessment will enable the development of a vaccination care plan which may include recommending an alternative vaccine such as the AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD COVID-19 vaccine.
- * **Documentation** of the discussion with the allergist/immunologist must be provided to the clinic and include a vaccination care plan (including what types of parameters the clinic should meet to provide safe vaccination administration, e.g., availability of advanced medical care), details/severity of the previous allergic episode(s), confirm that appropriate counselling on the safe administration of vaccine was provided, and include the date, the clinician's name, signature and contact information as well as the individual's name and date of birth.
- Referral and consultation support for Physicians and Nurse Practitioners is available through [Ontario's eConsult Service](#)
- Individuals who have had an allergic reaction within 4 hours and/or anaphylaxis that occurred with a vaccine or injectable medication that does not contain a component or cross-reacting component of the COVID-19 vaccines can receive the COVID-19 vaccine followed by observation for a minimum of 30 minutes.
- Individuals with a history of significant allergic reactions and/or anaphylaxis to any food, drug, venom, latex or other allergens not related to the COVID-19 vaccine can receive the COVID-19 vaccine followed by observation for a minimum of 15 minutes. Individuals with allergy issues like allergic rhinitis, asthma and eczema can receive the vaccine followed by observation for a minimum of 15 minutes.

As with the routine administration of all vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines should be administered in a healthcare setting capable of managing anaphylaxis, and individuals should be observed for a minimum of 15 minutes.

For additional information on allergy consult the [Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology statement on COVID-19 vaccination](#).

5. Children, adolescents and young adults

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is licensed by Health Canada for adolescents aged 12 years and older. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has been proven to be safe in clinical trials and provided excellent efficacy in adolescents. Side effects reported in adolescents were similar to those observed in adults, and were more frequent after the second dose. NACI continues to strongly recommend that a complete series with an mRNA vaccine be offered to all eligible individuals in Canada, including those 12 years of age and older, as the known and potential benefits outweigh the known and potential risks. The Janssen and AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines are currently not indicated for use in those under the age of 18 years. On August 27th, 2021 Health Canada authorized the use of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine for ages 12 and over.

There have been Canadian and international reports of myocarditis and pericarditis following vaccination with COVID-19 mRNA vaccines, and the [global experience](#) to date has indicated that the majority of reported cases have responded well to conservative therapy (rest, treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and tend to recover quickly. Please see the [COVID-19 Vaccine Information Sheet for Youth](#) for more information.

Following a thorough review of the current global and Canadian experience and [provincial](#) vaccine safety surveillance data, Ontario will continue using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for youth ages 12-17 (including those turning 12 in 2021). This preferential recommendation stems from the fact that there is more experience to date with this vaccine in this age group, and there is the possibility of a lower rate of myocarditis and/or pericarditis with Pfizer-BioNTech in this age group.

The benefits of vaccination with COVID-19 vaccines continue to outweigh the risks of COVID-19 illness and related, possibly severe consequences for all age groups. Based on advice from Ontario's Vaccine Clinical Advisory Group, the Ministry of Health is issuing a **preferential recommendation for the use of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for individuals 18-24 years of age**. This recommendation stems from an observed increase in the number of reports in Ontario of pericarditis/myocarditis following vaccination with Moderna relative to Pfizer-BioNTech in the 18-24 year old age group, particularly among males. Further information on trends in myocarditis/pericarditis following mRNA vaccines in Ontario are summarized in an enhanced epidemiologic summary from [Public Health Ontario](#).

In the context of adequate Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine supply, this preferential recommendation for the use of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in 18-24 year-olds is anticipated to reduce the rare number of events of myocarditis/pericarditis in Ontario. Myocarditis/pericarditis following COVID-19 mRNA vaccines remains a rare AEFI (defined by the Canadian Immunization Guide as occurring at frequency of 0.01% to less than 0.1%), even among the age groups with the highest observed rates of this event, and COVID-19 vaccines continue to be recommended to prevent COVID-19 disease, which also includes a risk of myocarditis/pericarditis. ([Public Health Ontario](#))

Evidence on this topic continues to evolve and this recommendation may be amended as more information becomes available. Vaccines are safe, effective and continue to be the best way to protect young adults, their families and our communities from COVID-19.

For children less than 12 years of age (or that are not turning 12 in 2021), vaccination is not recommended at this time. However, this recommendation should be revisited periodically as data emerge, taking into consideration the conditions under which such vaccination might be contemplated on a case-by-case scenario basis.

Vaccinating eligible caregivers/families of children as well as those in their network of contacts (i.e. ring vaccination) is an important component of the strategy to protect susceptible children.