

COVID-19 VACCINE

Getting ready for your COVID-19 vaccination

RESIDENTS OF LONG-TERM CARE HOMES

Staff and residents of long-term care homes in Ontario are a priority group in Phase 1 of Ontario's vaccine roll-out plan. People living in long-term care homes can be at an increased risk of severe illness if infected with COVID-19. Thankfully, as one of the first groups eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccination, you can be protected from this deadly virus.

Northwestern Health Unit (NWHU) recognizes that you may have questions about the COVID-19 vaccine, and we want to help provide answers so you can make an informed decision about getting the vaccine

Frequently Asked Questions

Why get vaccinated?

While many people with COVID-19 have only a mild illness, others may get very sick or may even die. There is no way to know how COVID-19 will affect you. COVID-19 vaccination helps protect you by creating an immune response without having to experience the illness of COVID-19.

Why are we getting the vaccine first?

Throughout the pandemic we have seen the tragedies that can happen when a long-term care home experiences an outbreak of COVID-19. Often people living in long-term care homes have illnesses or conditions that may make recovery from the virus more difficult or impossible. Protecting our communities' seniors, health care workers, and vulnerable populations is important to help save lives and to make sure our health care system can provide care to those who need it.

What if the vaccine isn't safe?

The COVID-19 vaccines being used have gone through the same rigorous testing protocols as all other vaccines approved for use in Canada. The vaccine is safe and has been approved for use by top scientists in many countries around the world. Some of the reasons the vaccine was able to be approved quickly:

- being informed by decades of research on other strains of coronavirus prior to COVID-19
- advances in science and technology
- international collaboration among scientists, health professionals, researchers, industry and governments
- increased dedicated funding

What is the shot like?

The vaccine is provided in two doses by a needle in the upper arm. Your second dose will be given 3-4 weeks after your first dose. You get some protection after the first dose and the most after receiving both doses.

What happens if I wait to get the vaccine?

LTC and retirement home residents and staff are currently first in line. If you wait, it may take longer to get the vaccine when you want it. Getting the first dose as soon as possible will give you protection while COVID-19 cases are still very high in the community.

What are the common side effects from the COVID-19 vaccine?

The most common side effects are mild to moderate. They include pain at the injection site, headache, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, chills and fever. Even if you experience mild side effects, it is important to receive the second dose. You may experience the same side effects with your second dose.

Are there any serious side effects?

Serious side effects are very rare. They include:

- hives
- swelling of mouth and throat
- trouble breathing, hoarseness or wheezing
- a fever over 40°C or 104°F
- seizures

Can I get COVID-19 from the shot?

No. There is no live COVID-19 in the vaccine so you cannot get the virus from the shot.

Is the vaccine mandatory?

No, the vaccine is not mandatory but COVID-19 vaccination is strongly encouraged. Accessing some services may require proof of immunization in the future.

If I had a reaction to a different vaccine in the past, can I still get the COVID-19 vaccine?

Check with your doctor or health care provider if you have had a serious allergic reaction to a vaccine in the past. They will look at your medical records and help you make the decision.

If I tested positive for COVID-19 in the past, should I still get the vaccine?

Yes. You will have some immunity from your infection, but no-one knows how long it will last. There are cases where people have acquired COVID-19 again before they could get vaccinated. You should not get the vaccine if you are sick or have COVID-19 right now. Wait until you are better to get the shot.

I just got vaccinated for something else. Can I still get the COVID-19 vaccine now?

You should wait 14 days before receiving the COVID-19 vaccine if you have had another type of vaccine.

After receiving your second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, you should not receive any other vaccines for 28 days. If for some reason you need another vaccine within 28 days, discuss this with your doctor or health care provider.

Does the COVID-19 vaccine change my DNA?

No, the vaccine cannot change your DNA in any way.

Why should I get vaccinated if the COVID-19 infection has a 99% survival rate?

COVID-19 can be a serious illness for many people and for some people, symptoms can last for months. Those people are called long haulers. The virus can even damage the heart, brain, lungs and increase the risk of long-term health problems. Even young, healthy people can feel unwell for weeks to months following a COVID-19 infection.

The short-term side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine are less than the risk and potential long-term health damages caused by the COVID-19 virus.

Who should not get the vaccine?

People who have allergies to the COVID-19 vaccine ingredients should not be vaccinated. Talk to your doctor or health care provider if you are unsure.

Right now, the following people should not routinely be offered the COVID-19 vaccine. If you believe you would benefit from being vaccinated talk to your doctor or health care provider.

- Under 16 (Pfizer product); under 18 (Moderna product)
- Pregnant women or those trying to get pregnant
- People who are breastfeeding
- People with compromised immune systems or autoimmune diseases

You should wait to get the vaccine if you are sick, have COVID-19 or received different vaccine in the past two weeks.

What is an mRNA vaccine and are the vaccines that we are receiving mRNA?

Both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines are mRNA vaccines, and they are injected in the upper arm muscle. Once inside you, an mRNA vaccine triggers a reaction that acts like your own body does when a foreign substance or infection gets in. Your body recognizes the intruder – in this case, a tiny protein – and makes antibodies. Those antibodies protect you against future infections.

Will the essential caregivers of LTC and retirement home residents also get vaccinated?

Yes, essential caregivers should get vaccinated at the same time as workers and residents.

I have heard there are new strains of the COVID-19 virus. Is there information about the effectiveness of the existing vaccine on the new strain?

Currently, experts believe the vaccine will work with the new strain. There is no evidence to suggest that the vaccine will not be effective against the new strain, however this is currently being explored through studies.

Will staff still be tested weekly for COVID-19 after they receive the second dose of the vaccine?

Yes. Staff will continue to be tested for COVID-19 after the second dose. This is based on the Ontario Ministry of Long-Term Care Guidelines. Any changes to these Guidelines will be communicated promptly.

Will people need to get the vaccine every year or is it just the two doses?

At this time, the Pfizer BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine will only be administered in two doses, 21 days apart. The Moderna COVID-19 vaccine will only be administered in two doses, 28 days apart.

Will the COVID-19 vaccine stop the COVID-19 virus, or will it decrease the severity of the virus if I get infected?

The vaccines are very effective at preventing COVID-19 symptoms in people who get it. It is not known if you can still give the infection to someone that has not been immunized if you have been exposed to the virus.

Where can I find more information?

More information about the vaccine can be found on the Province of Ontario's website at: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/> or call NWHU's COVID-19 hotline at 1-866-468-2240.

