



First Nations Health Authority  
Health through wellness

# What You Need to Know About the COVID-19 Vaccine



The First Nations Health Authority's (FNHA) Medical Officers and Nurses recommend the COVID-19 vaccine as an option to protect individuals, their families and their communities. Here's what you need to know about the vaccine's safety, effectiveness and rollout.

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<sup>†</sup> (Added to FAQ on Feb. 23, 2021)

At the end of this FAQ are links to more information including stories, articles and advice from FNHA's experts and websites of our trusted health partners.

*Check back often to find our most recent updates.*

## 1. WHAT IS THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

Vaccines are products that produce immunity to a specific disease like COVID-19. When you are immune to COVID-19 that means you may be exposed to it without becoming sick or if you do become infected, it can prevent more severe illness.

Currently, there are two COVID-19 Vaccines authorized for use in Canada: the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and the Moderna vaccine. Each of these require two doses to become fully effective.

Additional COVID-19 vaccines are under review by Health Canada.

## 2. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO GET A COVID-19 VACCINATION?

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are up to 92 per cent effective after one dose (as found in recent studies done in BC) and 94–95 per cent effective one to two weeks after the second dose.

The COVID-19 vaccine will also help protect everyone around you, too. The more people in a community who are vaccinated, the harder it is for the virus to spread and mutate. This is called “herd immunity” or “community immunity”.

Reduced access to stable housing, income, clean water and/or health and social services place some Indigenous peoples at higher risk of COVID-19. The vaccine is one way that Indigenous (and other) people can protect themselves from this virus.

Once enough people are immunized, we hope to be able to return to activities that haven't been possible during the pandemic.

The FNHA's Medical Officers strongly recommend that Indigenous people opt to get the vaccine when they are offered one.

## 3. WILL THE VACCINE WORK EVEN IF MY SECOND DOSE IS DELAYED?

The World Health Organization (WHO) Advisory Group on Immunizations allows for the second dose to be given up to six weeks (42 days) after the first dose in countries or areas where there is a high rate of transmission and limited vaccine supply. This is to allow as many people as possible to benefit from a first dose.

The strength of the immune response and long-term effectiveness of the vaccine is not expected to be decreased by this delay. If the dose is delayed longer than 42 days, the advice is to get the dose as soon as possible to make sure that protection stays high. However, there is no need to repeat the dose.

## 4. IS THE COVID-19 VACCINATION SAFE?

There is strong evidence that the vaccine is safe and works for all adults—including seniors/Elders – and that it is highly effective across age, sex, race and ethnicity.

Feeling worried or hesitant is normal when something is new and it is understandable that some people – especially Indigenous people – may lack trust in the medical system. However, vaccine trials go through rigorous, well-established ethical processes. We can feel assured that vaccines are safe, effective and that they will save lives.

## 5. WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 VACCINES?

Allergic reactions are possible from any vaccine or medicine. Symptoms of an allergic reaction include hives (bumps on the skin that are often very itchy); swelling of the face, tongue or throat; difficulty breathing.

These occur very rarely, however this is why you must [wait at least 15 minutes](#) before you leave the clinic or pharmacy after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine - and longer if you have a history of allergies. Clinic staff have the training and medications required to respond to an allergic reaction.

[Other reactions that can happen](#) occur because your immune system is responding to the vaccine. These kinds of side effects are usually mild and similar to ones you might get from any shots. They may be stronger for some people, particularly after the second dose. People can experience pain in the arm where they had the injection, tiredness, headache, muscle pain, chills, joint pain and low-grade fever. Reactions usually don't last more than a few days.

Above all, the major health risks associated with getting COVID-19 far outweigh the minor risks or discomfort from possible allergic reactions and side effects!

## 6. SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE IF I'VE TESTED POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 IN THE PAST?

If you've tested positive for COVID-19 you should wait up to 12 weeks after the testing date to be vaccinated. If you live in a remote community, it is safe to receive the vaccine earlier than that as long as at least 10 days have passed after you've experienced symptoms. If you were hospitalized for COVID-19 treatment you should speak with your doctor before being vaccinated.

## 7. SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE WHEN I AM IN QUARANTINE?

**You should not get vaccinated if you are in quarantine:**

- on the advice of public health officials due to possible contact with COVID-19
- following travel outside the country

If you live in a remote or isolated community scheduled for a vaccine clinic, and have been quarantining, you may be able to receive the vaccine if the vaccine provider is able to do so in a way that minimizes the risk of exposure for others. You must be exhibiting no symptoms and will be asked to have a symptom check immediately prior to vaccination.

## 8. SHOULD I GET THE VACCINE IF I'M PREGNANT OR BREASTFEEDING?

[Experts say that pregnant and breastfeeding individuals](#) would benefit from receiving the vaccine as the risk of getting COVID outweighs the potential risk of being vaccinated during pregnancy.

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, please contact your health care provider about whether the vaccine is right for you at this time.

## 9. CAN WE STOP FOLLOWING THE PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDELINES AFTER WE ARE VACCINATED?

Not yet. We need to continue to adhere to all of the recommended public health measures even if we've been vaccinated. That's because we don't know how long the vaccine will last or how well it prevents us from transmitting COVID-19 to others, even if we don't have symptoms.

To stop the spread of the virus, enough people need to be immune either through natural infection or immunization. The WHO estimates that at least 70 per cent of the population would need to be immune to ensure widespread protection.

## 10. WHAT IS THE FNHA'S VACCINE ROLLOUT PLAN?

Until vaccines become more widely available, the FNHA is focusing vaccine rollout on rural and remote communities and communities that have already experienced larger numbers of COVID-19 cases.

The FNHA, First Nations Health Council and First Nations Health Directors Association will continue to work with regional health authority partners to advance approaches that include urban and away-from-home (i.e., off-reserve) members, and with regional teams and First Nations leaders to identify the next set of communities for priority implementation.

The FNHA is promoting a "whole of community" approach in which everyone age 18 and over will be offered immunization.

## 11. HOW WILL COMMUNITIES BE NOTIFIED THAT THEY WILL BE RECEIVING THE VACCINE?

Chiefs will receive official confirmation from FNHA's CEO when vaccines are available for their community. FNHA regional teams will then provide wrap-around support to move forward with community vaccination campaigns as needed. Community leaders may refer to the [Toolkit for Communities Receiving COVID-19 Vaccine](#). If you're a health care professional, you can refer to the [BC Centre for Disease Control Question and Answer Document](#).

**Some things individuals can do to be ready for when vaccine is available in their communities:**

- Talk to your health care provider to see if the vaccine is right for you or if you have any concerns about your allergies or medical conditions, or side effects of the vaccine.
- Watch for the invitation to book an appointment. Or call your health centre to book an appointment or find out about clinic locations.

## 12. I AM A FIRST NATIONS PERSON LIVING AWAY FROM MY HOME COMMUNITY (I.E., OFF-RESERVE). WHEN AND WHERE CAN I RECEIVE THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

The regional health authorities are leading the allocation, distribution and administration of vaccines for First Nations people living off-reserve.

The FNHA is working with partners, including the regional health authorities, the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres and the Métis Nation of BC to advocate for culturally safe access to these vaccinations.

Although vaccines are currently in short supply, we are confident that these efforts will result in the continued prioritization of First Nations people in the government's vaccination strategy.

### 13. WILL ELDERS LIVING AWAY FROM THEIR HOME COMMUNITY (I.E., OFF-RESERVE) BE PRIORITIZED TO RECEIVE THE COVID-19 VACCINE

Yes. Starting in mid-February, regional health authorities will provide more information to Indigenous Elders (65 years of age and older) about how they can pre-register for immunization appointments.

This is part of phase 2 of the provincial government's [COVID-19 Immunization Plan](#) that will run from February to March (and that will also prioritize some other groups).

More information will be provided for those in phase 3 about when they can expect to be vaccinated; how and when they can pre-register; and how to access the vaccination clinics. Phase 3 involves an age-based approach from the oldest to the youngest including a small group of highly at risk immunosuppressed patients.

### 14. SHOULD I RETURN TO MY HOME COMMUNITY FOR VACCINATION

No. To do our part to stop the spread of COVID-19, we need to continue to follow [public health orders](#) and avoid non-essential travel. The FNHA, First Nations Health Council and First Nations Health Directors Association will continue to work with regional health authority partners to advance approaches that include urban and away-from-home (i.e., off-reserve) members.

### 15. WILL I BE PRIORITIZED FOR A VACCINE IF I HAVE AN UNDERLYING HEALTH CONDITION?

Individuals aged 16 to 64 with underlying health conditions that make them extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 will be eligible for the vaccine during phase 3 (April to June 2021). The full list of health conditions covered is on the [BC Emergency Preparedness COVID-19 website](#).

If you have specific questions about your underlying health condition and the COVID-19 vaccine, please contact your doctor. If you do not have a doctor of your own, you can access a doctor by phone with the [First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day](#), call 1-855-344-3800 to book an appointment.

#### MORE INFORMATION ON THE COVID-19 VACCINES

The FNHA works closely with our regional, provincial and federal health partners and can recommend and support the important information they provide:

- [The BC Centre for Disease Control](#)
- [Health Canada website](#)
- [Immunize BC](#)

If you are a client or health care provider with clinical questions or concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine and do not have access to a primary care provider, call First Nations Virtual Doctor of the Day at 1-855-344-3800. Medical Office Assistants are available to help you seven days per week from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

You can also call 8-1-1 or check in with your community nurse.

## FNHA ARTICLES ON THE COVID-19 VACCINES

- [Moving Toward Vaccine Confidence](#) (Feb. 10, 2021)
- [Just the facts: COVID-19 vaccine for pregnant or breastfeeding individuals](#) (Feb. 4, 2021)
- [COVID-19 Vaccine Hot Topics: Your second dose and adverse reactions](#) (Feb. 2, 2021)
- [Provincial government releases COVID-19 vaccine rollout plan](#) (Jan. 28, 2021)
- [Taking a shot at COVID-19 – an FNHA Doctor’s vaccine account](#) (Jan. 20, 2021)
- [Caution over COVID-19 Urged During Vaccine Rollout](#) (Jan. 18, 2021)
- [COVID-19 Vaccines \(Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna\) – How They Work](#) (Dec. 30, 2020)