

Answering Your Questions about the Vaccine

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Question 1: Do the vaccines protect against the UK variant?

On March 11th, Pfizer published a news release about a recent study on the effectiveness of their vaccine, which was done in the context of Israel's nationwide immunization program. When speaking about the B.1.1.7 variant (also known as the UK variant), the authors of this study said that the overall data suggests that their vaccine "is also effective for this variant." The paper says, "this study estimates an average effectiveness of the vaccine over multiple strains." However, the authors also acknowledged that they "cannot provide a specific effectiveness estimate for the B.1.1.7 variant." In other words, the authors could not provide a specific breakdown of how well the vaccine works at preventing COVID-19 in those who have the B.1.1.7 variant.

On Sunday, March 21st, a group of Montreal researchers told CTV News that their preliminary studies show that "the [Pfizer] vaccines that are being deployed are able to generate some level of immune protection against the [UK] variant." In the study's next phase, the researchers will follow a larger group and look at other variants, including the South African (B1351) and Brazilian (P1) variants. According to Public Health Ontario, all three of these Variants of Concern have been identified in Ontario.

The organization which has the authority to make a definitive statement about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines against Variants of Concern is the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI). NACI reviews evidence on the best use of vaccines that are currently and newly approved in Canada. NACI provides guidance about the use of vaccines by making recommendations that are based on the best current scientific knowledge that is available.

According to the most recently-updated version of NACI's *Recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccines* webpage, the national advisory committee states that "data about the efficacy of authorized mRNA COVID-19 vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, Moderna COVID-19 vaccine) and viral vector-based COVID-19 vaccine (AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine) against Variants of Concern is evolving. NACI will continue to monitor the evidence and update recommendations as needed."

In other words, according to NACI, none of the data that they have reviewed offers a clear answer about any of the vaccines' effectiveness against any of the Variants of Concern. Since NACI's review of recent studies is ongoing, the accuracy of these two previously-mentioned studies cannot be endorsed by the Public Health Agency of Canada at this time. NACI will update their recommendations once they find that there is enough evidence.

Sources:

<https://www.pfizer.com/news/press-release/press-release-detail/real-world-evidence-confirms-high-effectiveness-pfizer>.

<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2101765>.

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/new-sars-cov-2-variants-how-can-vaccines-be-adapted#Adapting-vaccines-to-match-variants>.

<https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/preliminary-data-from-montreal-study-shows-vaccines-offer-protection-against-u-k-covid-variant-1.5356618>.

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/diseases-and-conditions/infectious-diseases/respiratory-diseases/novel-coronavirus/variants>.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/vaccine-safety-poster.html>.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/naci-membership-representation.html>.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/recommendations-use-covid-19-vaccines.html>.

Question 2: I got Moderna. Can I get a second dose of another vaccine, like Pfizer or AstraZeneca?

No. The different vaccines work against the same virus, but the vaccines are not the same. Each vaccine has different ingredients, so they can't be mixed with each other. The Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccines require two doses because there is research which shows that these vaccines are more effective after the second dose. However, this only works when you get two doses of the same vaccine.

Source:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/recommendations-use-covid-19-vaccines.html>.

Question 3: Are we going into another lockdown?

Right now, nothing has been announced yet, but it is still a possibility. Despite the fact that daily case counts have been growing, since this past weekend, areas that are in the orange and red zones are allowed a significantly higher capacity for indoor dining. Also, restaurants are allowed to reopen for patio dining in Toronto and Peel Region, which are located in the grey zone of the framework, for the first time since November.

Meanwhile, on March 17th, CTV Toronto reported remarks from Dr. Peter Juni, who is the scientific director of Ontario's COVID-19 scientific advisory table.

On March 17th, Dr. Juni shared his belief that an "early and hard" three-week lockdown in the Golden Horseshoe region of Ontario is necessary to slow the spread of the variants of concern. He suggested that this step could cut down the length of closures from months to weeks and give the province enough time to vaccinate a significant portion of the population.

The "core cities" of the Golden Horseshoe include Halton Region, Hamilton, Niagara Region, Peel Region, Toronto, and York Region.

Sources:

<https://www.cp24.com/news/ontario-reports-1-699-new-covid-19-cases-today-as-positivity-rate-hospitalizations-climb-1.5356977>.

<https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/strict-three-week-lockdown-needed-to-stop-explosive-covid-19-variant-growth-ontario-science-table-says-1.5351152>.

Question 4: I am disabled and 63, should I wait to hear from my doctor or register for AstraZeneca at a pharmacy?

Vaccines are considered generally safe for most people. It is not required to speak to your doctor before getting vaccinated, but if you are concerned about how your disability could affect the effectiveness of the vaccine, talking to your doctor could help you become more informed and feel more reassured. You can also speak with a Registered Nurse over the phone by calling TeleHealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

Right now, anyone who is 60 or older can book their vaccine appointment at a pharmacy. Visit the province's vaccine appointment portal: <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/book-vaccine/>. Under "Eligible Group", enter "60 to 74 years old in 2021". You also need to enter your postal code. Then, the portal will give you a phone number to call to book your appointment.

If you are immunosuppressed or have an autoimmune condition, read this information:

According to the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), someone with an immunodeficiency or an autoimmune condition should receive a risk assessment of the benefits and risks for them to receive any COVID-19 vaccine. This assessment should be done on a case-by-case basis. This is because the degree of immunodeficiency varies depending on the person.

"NACI recommends that a complete vaccine series may be offered to individuals with an autoimmune condition if a risk assessment deems that the benefits outweigh the potential risks for the individual, and if informed consent includes discussion about the insufficiency of evidence on the use of COVID-19 vaccines in these populations."

In simpler terms, currently, there is no data on the effects of any COVID-19 vaccination in individuals who are immunosuppressed, and there is only limited data on the effects in people with autoimmune conditions. Unfortunately, people who are immunosuppressed were not included in the COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials, and participants with autoimmune conditions made up "a very small proportion of trial participants and represent a very narrow range of autoimmune conditions." However, non-immunosuppressed participants with an immunocompromising condition were included in these trials, and "no safety signals of concern have been noted to date." According to NACI, "informed consent includes discussion about current vaccine options and the timing of future vaccine options."

Source: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/recommendations-use-covid-19-vaccines.html>.

If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675