

Answering Your Questions about COVID-19

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Before I start with the article, I want to thank you so much for your patience and trust to answer your questions about COVID-19 over the years. As today is the last day of the project, I will no longer be answering questions about COVID-19.

For future questions about COVID-19, please try the following services:

1. You can call the Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre at 1-833-943-3900 to speak to a health specialist. (TTY phone number for people who are deaf, hearing-impaired or speech-impaired: 1-866-797-0007). This line is available in more than 300 languages, seven days a week from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

2. If you are comfortable with speaking on the phone, you can book a phone appointment with the VaxFacts Clinic to speak with a trusted doctor from the Scarborough Health Network at www.shn.ca/vaxfacts or 416-438-2911 ext. 5738. If you are Black and would prefer to speak with a doctor who is also from the Black community, either tell them over the phone or scroll down on the web page, and you can book an appointment with them.

This line is not just for people in Scarborough; it's for everyone in Canada. This service is available in over 200 languages. Unfortunately, there is no TTY option.

3. You can always contact your local public health unit. To find your public health unit, click [here](#).

Can I ask people to wear a mask if they don't have to anymore?

You can always ask people to wear a mask! You can say, "I know you don't *need* to, but I would feel much more comfortable if you did."

At this point in the pandemic, ideally, we shouldn't have to explain why wearing a mask would make you feel more comfortable, but the reality is that many people are desensitized to the risk. You might be more persuasive to them if you prepare an explanation that you feel comfortable sharing.

It might sound like this: “It’s important to me that you wear a mask around me because _____.”

For example, “It’s important to me that you wear a mask around me because I have a health condition that puts me at higher risk.” If someone asks you which health condition you have, you do not have to tell them! You can say “I prefer not to say.”

Other examples:

- “It’s important to me that you wear a mask around me because someone I live with/see often has a health condition that puts them at higher risk, and I don’t want to stop seeing them.”
- “It’s important to me that you wear a mask around me because I work with people who could get really sick if they get infected.”

If you don’t want to share that you or someone you care about has a health condition, you can always just say, “It’s important to me that you wear a mask around me because I don’t want to get sick.”

According to Dr. Danesh Alam, M.D., medical director of Behavioral Health Services at Northwestern Medicine Central DuPage Hospital: “It is OK to disclose what and how you feel about COVID-19. Setting clear boundaries around your personal space is very important. Direct conversations about safety, preventive measures and modeling your desired behaviour can go a long way” ([source](#)).

Source:

<https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/covid-19/emotional-health-covid-19/formalizing-your-covid-19-boundaries>

Do PSWs have to get the 3 or 4 booster doses?

No, they don’t. Personal Support Workers who work in Long-Term Care used to need to show proof that they received the booster shot ([source](#)). However, this mandate was revoked on March 14, 2022 ([source](#)).

It’s best to directly ask the agency that employs your PSW about their vaccination policy.

There is currently no government vaccine mandate in effect for any sector, so employers don’t have the ability to impose a policy on their workers that penalizes them for refusing to get vaccinated, including making them take an unpaid leave of absence and firing them ([source](#)). Any policy that attempts to do so could be illegal ([source](#)).

Sources:

1. <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/ontario-extends-booster-deadline-for-long-term-care-staff-untilmarch-14-1.5757629>

2. <https://stlawyers.ca/coronavirus-knowledge-centre/employer-mandatory-vaccinations/ontario/#:~:text=No%2C%20the%20Government%20of%20Ontario,revoked%20on%20March%2014%2C%202022.>

What is the new variant and how is it different?

If you're referring to the "Kraken" Omicron subvariant, click [here](#) to read an article I wrote on it!

If you're referring to the Omicron variant, this is the most dominant variant in the world, replacing the Delta variant ([source](#)). The Omicron variant spreads even more easily than the Delta variant ([source](#)). The more a virus spreads, the more it mutates ([source](#)). This is why the Omicron variant also has many other sub-variants within it ([source](#)).

According to Nathan Grubaugh, Ph.D., an epidemiologist at the Yale School of Public Health, variants like Omicron are a natural part of the progression of the virus ([source](#)). New variants aren't surprising, he says ([source](#)). "Delta was never going to be the last variant—and Omicron is not going to be the last one. As long as there is a COVID-19 outbreak somewhere in the world, there is going to be something new that emerges" ([source](#)).

Sources:

1. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/covid-19-omicron-xe-what-does-recombinant-mean-and-how-fast-does-this-variant-spread/articleshow/90926076.cms>
2. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/a-new-strain-of-coronavirus-what-you-should-know>
3. <https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/5-things-to-know-omicron>

How do we know the real case numbers? Are they hiding them on purpose?

In Ontario, we don't know the real case numbers because COVID-19 testing is only being done in high-risk health settings. It's not that the number of positive COVID-19 cases in the general population are being hidden, it's that they aren't being collected. Although there are records of every positive PCR COVID-19 test, this data isn't being gathered across public health units and shared in government reports like it used to. Even if these numbers were collected, we still wouldn't know the real number of cases because there is no way to know how many people are testing positive for COVID-19 on at-home Rapid Antigen Tests.

Can I go on the subway now?

There were never any public health restrictions against going on the subway. I wonder if you're asking because of last year's mandatory mask policy on the TTC.

At the moment, it isn't mandatory for people to wear a mask on the TTC, including buses, street cars, and the subway ([source](#)). Currently, the TTC does not enforce whether people are

wearing masks ([source](#)). In my experience, when I took the TTC in 2020 and 2021, there were still many people who did not wear a mask even though that rule existed and was being enforced.

There is a relatively low risk of getting infected if you take the subway as long as you wear a mask and keep your distance from others. This will be easier if you plan to travel at less busy times to avoid the crowdedness of people commuting to and from work!

Source:

1. <https://www.ttc.ca/covid-19/face-masks-and-face-coverings>

Which vaccine should I get?

Any vaccine that has been approved by Health Canada is a good one to get. In terms of booster doses, the bivalent (updated) vaccines offer more protection against the Omicron variants than the original versions of the booster dose! Click [here](#) to learn more about bivalent vaccines.

If you have any questions about your personal health condition, please reach out to the Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre or the VaxFacts clinic. Their contact information is in the beginning of this article.

Source:

<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/respiratory-viruses/covid-19/covid-19-vaccines/covid-19-about-the-vaccines/>

If I have the flu, can I get the Pfizer vaccine?

It's best to wait until you recover from the flu before you get a COVID-19 vaccine!

Source:

<https://www.fnha.ca/about/news-and-events/news/getting-your-flu-shot-or-covid-19-vaccine-after-youre-no-longer-sick>

I was sick after the last vaccine, should I get the booster?

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada:

“After being vaccinated, it's common and normal to have temporary side effects, even after a COVID-19 infection. These usually last from a few hours to a few days after vaccination. This is the body's natural response, as it's working hard to build immunity against the disease. People react differently after being vaccinated. Even if you experience temporary side effects, keep up to date on the vaccinations recommended for you, including booster doses. This will help protect you from serious outcomes from COVID-19” ([source](#)).

Some common side effects are: chills, fatigue, joint pain, headache, mild fever, and muscle aches ([source](#)). It's also common for your arm to be a bit red, swollen, and sore in the spot where you got vaccinated ([source](#)).

I strongly recommend that you talk with your doctor about this question, including your health history and what kind of symptoms you had after the last vaccine. If you don't have a doctor, you can talk to a health specialist through the Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre or a doctor through the VaxFacts clinic. Their contact information is in the beginning of this article.

Source:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/vaccines/safety-side-effects.html>

Hi Natalie, are more boosters coming after this one?

Hi :) Yes, more boosters are coming. Instead of thinking about the number of doses, think about whether it has been six months or more since your last dose or COVID-19 infection!

According to Dr. Vinita Dubey, Toronto Public Health's Associate Medical Officer of Health, someone who has had two boosters, but their most recent dose was over a year ago has less protection than someone who has had just one booster dose if they got it just one month ago.

The immunity that the vaccine provides wears off over time ([source](#)). For the strongest protection against COVID-19, we are encouraged to keep up-to-date with our booster doses ([source](#)).

Health Canada still has not released its recommendations for booster doses for the spring. However, a recent statement by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) suggests that, going forward, not everyone is equally recommended to get a booster dose every six months.

NACI recommended that these groups should get a booster dose in the Spring of 2023:

- Adults 80 years of age and older
- Adult residents of Long-Term Care homes and other congregate living settings for seniors or those with complex medical care needs
- Adults 18 years of age and older who are moderately to severely immunocompromised (due to an underlying condition or treatment)
- Adults 65 to 79 years of age, especially if they did not get COVID-19 yet ([page 9](#)).

Sources:

1. <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/respiratory-viruses/covid-19/covid-19-vaccines/covid-19-vaccine-eligibility-doses/>

2. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/vaccines-immunization/national-advisory-committee-immunization-guidance-additional-covid-19-booster-dose-spring-2023-individuals-high-risk-severe-illness-due-covid-19/statement.pdf>

Isn't 5 jabs too much in 2 years?

It's very reasonable to be concerned about the number of boosters. The question about whether continued booster doses are necessary has been recently answered by a team of scientists ([source](#)). These scientists were led by faculty at the Yale School of Public Health and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte ([source](#)).

The study is the first to quantify the long-term likelihood of future infection after being boosted by bivalent Moderna or Pfizer vaccines ([source](#)). According to this study, updated boosters that were given once or twice a year greatly reduced the long-term risk of infection from COVID-19 ([source](#)). Not getting an updated booster shot, they found, triples the risk of future infection compared with annual boosting ([source](#)).

“The risk of future infection is strongly linked to the timing of boosting,” said lead author Jeffrey Townsend, Elihu Professor of Biostatistics at Yale School of Public Health and Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology with Yale's Faculty of Arts and Sciences ([source](#)). “Waiting one and a half years nearly doubles the long-term risk of infection compared to boosting annually” ([source](#)).

If you feel uncomfortable at the thought of getting a booster dose every six months, you could choose to get boosted once a year. You should talk to your doctor about this choice, especially if you are immunocompromised. If you don't have a doctor, you can talk to a health specialist through the Provincial Vaccine Contact Centre or a doctor through the VaxFacts clinic. Their contact information is in the beginning of this article.

Source:

1. <https://ysph.yale.edu/news-article/annual-or-biannual-boosters-are-optimal-for-fighting-endemic-covid-19-study-shows/>

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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:

Health Connect Ontario: 811
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

Please refer to previous updates as lots of important information has been provided that may still be relevant. If you have any questions or require more information on how you can protect yourself and those around you from the COVID-19 virus, please contact our Senior Manager of Client Services/Lead AAC Facilitator Jessica at 416-222-4448 or jessica.nydp@gmail.com.