

Do You Qualify for a Third Dose of a COVID-19 Vaccine?

August 27, 2021

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The following information is paraphrased from a document by Ontario's Ministry of Health. Click [here](#) to see the original document, which was published on August 18, 2021. This document is not intended to provide or take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or legal advice.

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Not everyone has been able to get their first or second dose of an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna). While some people are choosing not to get vaccinated, there are others who want the vaccine but haven't been able to get it because of barriers like finding accessible transportation and finding clinics that can accommodate their disability. Ontario's COVID-19 vaccination program is still focussed on helping people overcome barriers like these so that they can get their first and second doses as soon as possible.

For the general population, two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine will give them strong protection against catching COVID-19 and its variants, as well as suffering from severe symptoms. Getting two doses of the vaccine is the best protection against the Delta variant. But two doses might not be enough for some specific groups of people, and these people qualify for a third dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

You can get a third dose if you are an elderly person and you live in a Long-Term Care Home, High-Risk Retirement Home, or Elder Care Lodge

For the first 3 to 4 months after fully vaccinating residents, the number of outbreaks in Long-Term Care Homes decreased considerably. However, now that it has been about 6 months since their second dose, outbreaks are occurring in these environments, and fully-vaccinated elderly people are getting infected and dying from COVID-19. Recent studies have shown that fully-vaccinated elderly people have a less robust immune response, and that antibody responses in this population wear off more quickly than in younger people.

Due to the Delta variant, COVID-19 is spreading more quickly in the general population. The government predicts that these increased numbers in the community will cause more outbreaks in Long-Term Care Homes, High-Risk Retirement Homes, and Elder Care Lodges. So, a third dose of a COVID-19 vaccine is being offered to elderly people who live in these high-risk settings.

If this applies to you, you should get your third dose at least five months after your second dose. This timeline is the same as other vaccines that require a third dose booster shot to strengthen the protection of a vaccine series that takes two doses to be fully vaccinated.

Also, it is strongly recommended that everyone who is in close contact with you is fully vaccinated. This includes healthcare workers, support staff, family, friends, and caregivers.

You can get a third dose if you are “severely immunocompromised”

If you have a health condition that affects your immune response, you are not automatically eligible for a third dose. At this time, only these groups of people can get a third dose:

- Transplants recipients (including solid organ transplant and hematopoietic stem cell transplants).
- People who are receiving treatment with an anti-CD20 agent (e.g. rituximab, ocrelizumab, ofatumumab). This type of agent is commonly used for conditions such as multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, leukemias/lymphoma, and more.
- People who are receiving active treatment (e.g. chemotherapy, targeted therapies, and immunotherapy) for malignant hematologic disorders (e.g. acute myeloid leukemia, chronic myeloid leukemia, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, chronic lymphocytic leukemia).

If you are in one of these groups, you should get your third dose at least two months after your second dose. You should speak with the healthcare provider who is giving you this treatment about the exact timing of when you should get your third dose. There is an ideal time that would trigger an optimal immune response and minimize delays in managing your underlying condition.

Also, if you are in one of these groups, it is strongly recommended that everyone who is in close contact with you gets both doses of a COVID-19 vaccine. This includes healthcare workers, support staff, family, friends, and caregivers.

What about people who have an autoimmune condition, or people who are immunocompromised but not “severely immunocompromised?”

The Ministry of Health is closely following the research on the safety and effectiveness of a third dose. These recommendations will be re-examined and replaced on an ongoing basis once there is more research available. Other immunocompromised groups may be added to this list in the future. You can find updates on the [Ministry of Health’s COVID-19 website](#).

The Ministry of Health recommends that people who have an autoimmune condition and people who are immunocompromised get both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

The Ministry of Health acknowledges that some of the Phase 3 clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines excluded people who were immunocompromised due to disease or treatment, and

the people with autoimmune conditions who were included did not represent a large variety of conditions. As a result, there is limited data on the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines in these groups of people.

Still, the Ministry of Health says that two doses of the vaccine **“should”** be offered to: people over the age of 12 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.).

If this applies to you, the Ministry of Health **“strongly encourages”** you to speak with your healthcare provider about the timing of your vaccination in relation to the treatment you’re getting for your underlying health condition(s). Depending on your condition, it’s possible that the vaccine might be less effective in those who use immunosuppressive therapy.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Health says that you **“may choose to receive the vaccine”** if you are not included in the previous groups and you are above the age of 12 and have autoimmune conditions, immunodeficiency conditions, and/or if you are immunosuppressed due to disease or treatment. You **“may choose to”** consult with your healthcare provider before getting vaccinated, such as to discuss the timing when you will take immunosuppressive medication in relation to getting vaccinated.

If you are immunocompromised and fully vaccinated, the Ministry of Health recommends that you continue to follow Public Health Measures, including: meeting up in person with people who are fully vaccinated, meeting outside if possible, increasing the ventilation in indoors spaces with other people by opening windows and doors, limiting the size of social gatherings, considering the vaccination status of other people who are attending social gatherings, wearing a mask, and maintaining physical distancing.

I have a specific condition. Where can I get more information on the COVID-19 vaccine?

- 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](#).

I am pregnant or breastfeeding. Can I get a third dose?

You can't because you are not recommended to get a third dose of the vaccine. However, it is safe for you to get two doses of a mRNA COVID-19 vaccine when you are breastfeeding and/or pregnant. If you are pregnant, it is recommended that you get vaccinated as soon as possible because COVID-19 infection can be more severe during pregnancy. You are at increased risk of being hospitalized, admitted to the Intensive Care Unit, and dying.

During the clinical trials of COVID-19 vaccines, pregnant people were not included, so there is limited data specifically from clinical trials. However, there is real-world data on the safety of vaccines in this population. Hundreds of thousands of pregnant people have safely received COVID-19 vaccines without any concerning side effects. It is considered safe to get vaccinated against COVID-19 at any time during your pregnancy, including your first trimester.

You can find more information on COVID-19 and pregnancy on the Ministry of Health's website at [COVID-19 Vaccination: Special Populations - Vaccination in Pregnancy & Breastfeeding Decision-Making Tool](#) for Pregnant Individuals.

Click [here](#) for more information from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination in Pregnancy. Click [here](#) to read the National Advisory Committee on Immunization's (NACI) Recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccines.

What about children?

Currently, children are not recommended to get a third dose of the vaccine, and only the Pfizer vaccine is recommended for those who are turning 12 years old in 2021 and older. The other vaccines are still in clinical trials to see if they will be safe for people younger than 18.

How were these groups of people chosen?

The Vaccine Clinical Advisory Group made a recommendation to the provincial government's Ministry of Health about which groups of people can be considered for a third dose. The Vaccine Clinical Advisory Group's recommendation is based on which groups of people have a lower immune response and an increased risk of infection. After reviewing that recommendation, as of August 18, the Ministry of Health decided who should receive a third dose of an mRNA vaccine.

Final Thoughts

The intention behind writing this document is to help people understand why they can or cannot get a third dose of an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine. This document is meant to simplify the Ministry of Health's [original document](#), which is 10 pages long. Both this document and

the Ministry of Health's document are not meant to provide or take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or legal advice.

If you think you might be able to qualify for a third dose, speak with your doctor or call 1-866-797-0000 to discuss your situation with a Registered Nurse at Telehealth Ontario. The phone call is confidential and free.

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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:

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