

Mixed Messaging on Vaccine Mixing

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It's fair to say that the general public's trust in public health messaging has been declining throughout the pandemic. Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and Health Canada have given mixed messages. Just a few months ago, there was a spike in concern when a NACI representative remarked, "What we're saying — and what we've been saying all along — is that mRNA vaccines are the preferred vaccines"* despite the fact that Health Canada had been insisting that all vaccines are equally effective.*

On top of that, some media outlets have contributed to the problem by misrepresenting information and spreading misinformation. Understandably, a lot of people have been feeling on edge and concerned, and we're experiencing another wave of valid confusion due to the recent news that the Chief Scientist of the World Health Organization (WHO) apparently advised against people mixing and matching COVID-19 vaccines from different manufacturers, even calling it dangerous.*

The mixed messaging on mixing vaccines has caused a lot of worry and concern, especially among the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who followed public health advice and got a second dose from a different company than their first dose.* In light of this news, some people are choosing not to go to their appointments for the second dose. This article will contextualize these comments by the WHO so that people can make an informed decision about getting their second dose and completing their vaccine series.

Some concern might be eased by the fact that Dr. Soumya Swaminathan's comment was taken wildly out of context by the media. Her comment has been misrepresented as a criticism of countries' policies that promote mixing mRNA vaccines for the second dose, but she was talking about an entirely different topic.* Dr. Swaminathan's comment was made in the context of a conversation about booster doses, not getting the second dose to complete a vaccine series.* She was speaking about individuals, not health agencies, choosing which vaccine they will get for their booster doses.*

Dr. Swaminathan said: "It's a little bit of a dangerous trend here. We are in a data-free, evidence-free zone as far as mix and match. There is limited data on mix and match."* According to CTV News, she was warning that "it could become a 'chaotic situation' in countries where citizens decide to take 'a second, or a third, or a fourth dose.'"

Later that day, she tweeted “Individuals should not decide for themselves, public health agencies can, based on available data. Data from mix and match studies of different vaccines are awaited - immunogenicity and safety both need to be evaluated.”*

Dr. Swaminathan also retweeted a doctor who had written, “@doctorsoumya from @WHO warned against individuals ‘vaccine shopping’ outside of public health regulations (and in some cases, getting 3rd 4th doses on their own). She did NOT say that individual countries’ vaccine policies were ‘dangerous.’”*

Health officials from the federal and provincial governments and other Canadian health experts quickly responded to the misrepresentation of her comment.* They emphasized that Canada’s approach was safe, effective, and in the best interest of the general population.*

For example, in response to a headline by CP24 that read, “World Health Organization urges countries to stop ‘dangerous trend’ of mixing and matching different COVID-19 vaccines”, Dr. Isaac Bogoch replied, “We see data from the UK, Spain & Germany demonstrating that mixing vaccines (in the manner we are doing in Canada) is safe & provides a significant/robust immune response.”*

The office of Ontario’s Health Minister Christine Elliott also referenced real-world success with mixing mRNA vaccines, saying “Ontario continues to follow the advice of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), which recommends that it is safe to mix vaccines based on studies from the UK, Spain and Germany that have found that mixing vaccines is safe and produces a strong immune response.”* A document from Ontario’s Ministry of Health defended that there is “no reason to believe” that mixing vaccines would result in any additional safety issues or reduction in protection.*

Canada’s chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam has stressed that aiming for full vaccination as quickly as possible is more important than ever to control the spread of the Delta variant.* This variant spreads more easily and causes more severe illness than the original COVID-19 virus and its other variants.* What’s more, the protection that comes from one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine is also less effective against the Delta variant.*

“The interchangeability of vaccines means that you can receive one vaccine product for your first dose and then safely receive a different vaccine for your second dose to complete your two-dose vaccine series for optimal protection from COVID-19,” says Dr. Tam.*

NACI’s recommendations as of July 2 continue to support mixing mRNA vaccines, such as the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, saying that they can be interchangeable if the same product was not readily available for the second dose.* The NACI report did acknowledge that “There are currently no data on the simultaneous administration of COVID-19 vaccine with other vaccines, although a number of studies are ongoing.”* However, they recommend it anyway because both Pfizer and Moderna use similar mRNA technology.*

If you ever have doubts about what is and isn't safe, you can always ask your general practitioner for their opinion. If you don't have a doctor, you can always speak to a registered nurse by calling Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000.

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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