

March 1, 2021

To Our Patients and the Citizens of the Elgin and Oxford Area,

This past year has been a roller-coaster for all of us, to say the least. While some of us have been able to get through it relatively easily, we know others have struggled tremendously. As your family doctors, we have seen the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on your physical, emotional and financial health. We know that you look forward to it being over as much as we do.

As many of you know, Health Canada has approved the use of several vaccines against COVID-19, representing what many of us consider to be a great feat in modern medicine. Moving from identifying a new virus to having several vaccines against this virus in under a year has taken an incredible coordinated effort. However, we also realize that many of you have questions – good questions – that need to be answered before you can feel confident in these vaccines.

We represent Family Physicians and Primary Care Nurse Practitioners in Oxford and Elgin Counties. In the coming months we will be doing everything we can to ensure that each of you has access to a COVID-19 vaccine, and we want to use this time to answer any questions you might have. You may be wondering if we really believe in this vaccine, and if we think you should get it. The answer, in short, is yes. You may be wondering if we ourselves will be getting vaccinated. Again, barring any medical reason not to, the answer is absolutely. Some of us working in long-term care and retirement homes are grateful to have the opportunity to already receive the vaccine. We did this *without hesitation*, to protect ourselves, our families and our most vulnerable patients.

Below you will find ten of the most frequently asked questions (and answers) regarding the two mRNA COVID-19 vaccines. Of note, there are a few other (non-mRNA) vaccines that are currently in development. As other vaccines become approved and available, we will critically assess them, just as we have the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech ones. If you have more questions, please visit <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-vaccines-ontario> or contact your family physician or nurse practitioner or specialist physician to discuss them. In a world of so much misinformation, if you don't have a physician to ask, please contact **Southwestern Public Health** who have compiled the most evidence-based, trustworthy and most current information on their website:

<https://www.swpublichealth.ca/en/my-health/covid-19-vaccine.aspx>

Elgin: 519-631-4125 Oxford: 519-533-4560

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. Vaccination against this virus is going to be integral to us all being able to move forward. So please, if you have any questions or concerns about it, let us know. In the meantime, we will continue to be here to serve you through our offices and hope you will stay safe while continuing to follow public health guidelines.

Sincerely, Family Physician members of the Southwestern Public Health COVID Vaccine Advisory Committee:

Elgin: Dr. Kellie Scott, St. Thomas & Dr. Jillian Toogood, Aylmer

Oxford: Dr. Rachel Orchard, Woodstock & Dr. Jay Taylor, Ingersoll

Ten FAQs about COVID-19 Vaccinations

- 1. How effective is the vaccine?** The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna mRNA vaccines have been shown to be over 94% effective at preventing COVID-19. Trials also showed that they both significantly decreased the severity of disease in the small number of people who contracted the virus after receiving the vaccine.
- 2. How long after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine will it take to be immune?** It typically takes a few weeks for the body to build immunity after vaccination. This means that you COULD still become infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 for a short time after receiving the vaccine. Both the Pfizer-BioNTech and the Moderna vaccine will require two shots in order to achieve full immunity.
- 3. Can people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past be vaccinated?** Yes. At this time, experts are not sure how long someone is protected from getting sick again after recovering from COVID-19, and since re-infection is possible, even those who have previously had COVID-19 should be immunized. However, due to limited supply at the moment, we will focus on vaccinating those with no immunity (and therefore higher risk) first.
- 4. Can the COVID-19 Vaccine cause a COVID-19 Infection?** No. None of the COVID-19 vaccines currently in development use the live virus that causes COVID-19. However, it is possible to develop side effects shortly after being vaccinated, including fever. These side effects are normal and are caused by your immune system responding to the vaccine. They are a sign that your immune system is working and doing what it is supposed to do.
- 5. What are the side effects of the vaccine?** The most frequent reactions are: pain at the site of injection (84.1%), fatigue (62.9%), headache (55.1%), muscle pain (38.3%), chills (31.9%), joint pain (23.6%) and fever (14.2%). These side effects are usually mild to moderate and resolve within a few days. Both the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines have similar side effects. If you experience a significant side effect following vaccination, please let your family doctor or another healthcare professional know. Any serious side effects or reactions are reported and tracked. You can view reactions reported here for yourself: <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/vaccine-safety/#a6> As of Feb 19, 2021 over 1.4 Million doses have been given in Canada with 1235 (0.088% of all doses) reported side effects with 167 (0.012% of all doses) considered serious. These are very safe vaccines.
- 6. Is there anyone who CAN NOT receive the COVID-19 vaccine?** There are only 2 groups that cannot receive the vaccine. **Under 16** (only because they were not included in the initial trials - studies are ongoing about this population) and **those who have a KNOWN anaphylactic allergy to the vaccine itself** (i.e. after receiving your first dose), **or any of the vaccine ingredients** (polyethylene glycol is the most significant one). If you have had a severe allergic reaction to other vaccines, please talk to your primary care provider or family doctor as they may recommend consultation with an allergist prior to receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. People with other severe allergies (such as foods, latex, etc) may receive the

vaccine with an extended period of observation. There are 2 other categories of people who were NOT included in the vaccine trials: women who were pregnant/breastfeeding and people who are immunosuppressed due a disease or treatment, or living with an autoimmune disorder. Good news, though! This does not mean they can't receive the vaccine. We always have to weigh the potential risk versus potential benefit with any medical treatment, including vaccines. If you fall into one of these two categories, please talk to your primary care provider or specialist about the balance of risks and benefits to help you make your decision.

7. **It seems like these mRNA vaccines were developed VERY quickly. Are they safe?** Yes. In fact, research on mRNA vaccines has been ongoing for over 10 years, and although the COVID-19 vaccines are the first ones to use this technology, the use of mRNA has been successful in other areas of medicine including cancer treatments. Additionally, the vaccines were produced faster than before, not because of skipped steps, but because of unprecedented numbers of trial participants, widespread disease prevalence and collaboration and funding from around the world.
8. **How was Health Canada able to approve the COVID-19 vaccine so quickly? Did they lower their safety standard for the vaccines?** No. The reason the COVID-19 vaccine was approved so quickly is **not** because standards changed. It is because Health Canada used a more efficient process for vaccine authorization. The safety requirements in clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccine were as strict as for any other vaccine.
9. **Once I have been vaccinated with the required two doses, can I stop following public health measures like wearing a mask, physical distancing and self-isolating if I become sick?** As of right now, the answer is no. Until the majority of the population is immunized, we will all have to continue to practice all the currently recommended public health measures. Other factors, including how the virus is spreading in communities, will also affect how long we must continue with these measures. Bottom line: the more people that get vaccinated, the better!
10. **When will I be able to get my COVID-19 Vaccine?** The goal of the vaccination program is to protect those most at risk of dying of COVID-19 and to protect those essential workers such as healthcare workers, or others who cannot stay home to ensure our healthcare system and other essential services can continue to take care of everyone. As vaccine doses are still in limited supply, these groups need priority, but as we receive more, younger and lower-risk groups will become eligible. The current eligibility for the vaccine is determined by the province not by us as your primary care providers. Despite recent messaging from the province, we do not have any more information for you about your appointments at this time, but you will hear about which groups are eligible to book appointments very soon. Please do not call our offices asking when we are scheduling you for your vaccine. We are also working to eliminate any barriers to access for those who may have difficulty accessing information or appointments or difficulty getting to a vaccine centre. In the meantime, please subscribe to Southwestern Public Health's vaccine updates at the bottom of this website to receive direct updates as new groups become eligible: <https://www.swpublichealth.ca/en/my-health/covid-19-vaccine.aspx>.