It is important to know the facts about the COVID-19 vaccine so you can have an informed conversation with your family member about whether or not they should get the vaccine. We hope this information sheet will help you with those conversations.

What is COVID-19?

- COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the 2019 coronavirus.
- COVID-19 can spread when someone who has the virus coughs, sneezes, talks or even breathes near another person.
- Some people might have the virus and not know it, and still spread it to others.
- People with COVID-19 may have:
  - a cough
  - a fever
  - feel tired
  - might not be able to taste or smell very well
  - have trouble breathing
  - diarrhea or vomiting
  - chills
  - a runny nose.
- Some people with COVID-19 have mild symptoms. Others may not feel sick at all. But some people with COVID-19 get very sick and can die.

What is a vaccine?

- A vaccine tells your immune system to make antibodies that help your body fight against a germ that could hurt you.
- Scientists make vaccines to protect you and other people against germs, including bacteria and viruses such as the coronavirus.
- We already get vaccines for other illnesses, like polio, the flu and measles.
- The COVID-19 vaccine works with your body’s natural defenses to fight off COVID-19, just like other vaccines do.
• The COVID-19 vaccine is given through a needle.
• Scientists and health care providers think fewer people will get sick with COVID-19 if more people have the vaccine.
• Scientists and health care providers think it is important for everyone to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

**How does the COVID-19 vaccine work?**
• The COVID-19 vaccine trains your immune system to make antibodies against the coronavirus. If you are exposed to the COVID-19 virus after getting the vaccine, the antibodies are ready to help fight it off and stop you from getting sick.
• The vaccine does not contain the COVID-19 virus so it cannot give you COVID-19. Instead, the vaccine gives your body a recipe to make antibodies.
• You have to get the vaccine twice to be fully protected from COVID-19. The person giving you the vaccine will tell you when to get your second one.

**Do I really need the second vaccine?**
• Yes. It is very important to get both doses of the vaccine. The second dose tells the immune system to create even more antibodies. That will give your body the best chance to fight off the virus.

**Is the vaccine safe? How do we know?**
• Yes, the vaccine is safe, and it is the main way we will beat COVID-19.
• The vaccine does not give you COVID-19. It only works with your immune system so that your body will be ready to fight the virus if you come in contact with it.
• Doctors and scientists have worked to make sure that the vaccine is safe to use.
• Scientists tested the vaccine with many, many people. They gave all the people in the tests a needle. Some people had the vaccine in their needle and some people got a needle that didn’t have a vaccine in it.
• Then the scientists looked at what happened to the people in both groups.
• Almost all the people who got the vaccine didn’t get sick. A lot more people got sick who did not get the vaccine.
What are the side effects of the vaccine?

- Common side effects include:
  - sore arm
  - redness and swelling where you got the needle
  - feeling tired
  - headache
  - mild fever or chills
  - muscle ache or joint pain.
- These side effects are usually mild or moderate and go away after a few days.

Is there anyone who should not get the vaccine?

- There are no COVID-19 vaccines approved for anyone under the age of 16 years. More tests are being done right now to make sure it is safe for children and youth.
- If you have any symptoms that make you think you might have COVID-19, you might have to wait to get the vaccine.
- You should not get the vaccine if you have severe allergies or reactions to:
  - any vaccine ingredients, including polyethylene glycol (PEG). PEG is a common ingredient and can be found in some products such as medications, laxatives and cough syrups
  - your first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Why is it important for people with mental illness and/or addictions to get the vaccine?

- This pandemic has been very hard for everyone, especially people with mental illness and those with drug or alcohol problems.
- People with serious mental illness are more likely to get COVID-19 and become really sick.
- People who take drugs, or are addicted to drugs, are also more likely to get COVID-19 and become really sick.
- Vaccines protect the people who get them, and protect the people around them.
- The more people who say yes and get the vaccine, the sooner our lives can return to normal.
- People who do not get the vaccine will still be worried about getting COVID-19, and passing it on to others. They won’t feel as free to do things when the pandemic is over.
How do I have a conversation with a family member about getting the vaccine?

- Start the conversation in a casual, curious and open manner to maintain trust.
- Listen carefully and acknowledge their questions, concerns and worries.
- Encourage them to talk to their doctor or a care team member to answer their questions and address their concerns.
- If they are willing, attending appointments to help them talk to their doctor about the vaccine could be helpful.
- Assure them that you would not be encouraging them to get the vaccine if you knew it would harm them.
- Remind them that you care for them and their health.
- Remind them that if more people get vaccinated life will return to normal sooner.
- Mention that you will also get the vaccine as soon as it is available to you.

What if my family member is anxious or paranoid about getting the vaccine?

- Let them openly talk about their anxieties and paranoia around the vaccine and listen to them.
- Tell them that their anxieties are valid. If they are anxious about how quickly the vaccine was developed, you can remind them that the technology is advanced and it has been a worldwide effort.
- Encourage them to talk to their doctor or care team members who might provide them with professional and medical answers and ask them if they want you there for support.
- Remind them that there is plenty of misinformation online and that not all resources are credible. Help guide them to reliable information sources.
- Do not bring up the topic constantly. Give them some space to read what you gave them or think about what the doctor told them.
What happens if my family member has an allergic reaction?
• It is very rare for people to get an allergic reaction from the COVID-19 vaccine.
• The doctors and nurses will watch for any allergic reactions while your family member waits for a short period of time after getting the vaccine.
• If your family member develops hives, trouble breathing, or swollen face, tongue and throat, call 911.

What about my family member’s medications? Will the vaccine affect them?
• Most people who take medications don’t need to worry about how their medications will mix with the vaccine. Still, this is a good question for them to ask their doctor or pharmacist.
• If they take anticoagulants (blood thinners), they should tell the person giving them the vaccine so they can try to reduce any bruising they might get from the needle.

What if my family member does not want to get the vaccine? What are their rights?
• Getting the COVID-19 vaccine in Ontario is voluntary. They can discuss whether getting the vaccine is right for them with their doctor, care team members, family, and other people they trust.
• Before they get the vaccine, they will need to sign a form to show that they understand that they are getting the vaccine and that they agreed to get it. They can change their mind at any time before getting the vaccine. They can also ask for more information.

What if my family member has a substitute decision maker (SDM)?
• If they have a substitute decision maker, then that person will make this decision for them. Their substitute decision maker will need to consider anything they have expressed in the past about vaccination. If they have never said anything before about getting the vaccine, or vaccination in general, their substitute decision maker will decide if the vaccine is in their best interest.
• Before getting the vaccine their substitute decision maker will sign the form on their behalf.
• Encourage them to talk to their doctor if they want more information about their rights.
After my family member gets the vaccine, do they still need to be careful?

- Yes, you are not fully protected against COVID-19 after your first dose of the vaccine. You need the second dose of the vaccine to be fully protected.
- After the second dose, they will still need to be careful, because we don’t know if those who are vaccinated can still give COVID-19 to other people even if they themselves don’t get sick.
- It will take time to vaccinate everyone, so they will still need to be careful.
- Even after getting the vaccine, they should follow the public health guidelines:
  - wear a mask
  - wash or sanitize your hands often
  - stay 6 feet apart from other people, when possible
  - avoid crowds.

Notes

If you or your family member have questions, please encourage them to talk to their doctor.

This information sheet is not intended to be a resource for people who require screening for COVID-19 or who are experiencing a mental health crisis. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, please call 911 immediately or go to your nearest emergency department.

For more information, visit www.camh.ca/covid19

Adapted with permission from CAMH’s Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre