What do I need to know about the COVID-19 vaccine?

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.
- Doctors think fewer people will get sick with COVID-19 if more people have the vaccine.
- Doctors think it is important for everyone to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

If you have questions, please talk to your doctor.
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 keep 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 \textbf{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.
Who should get the vaccine?

- Everyone should get the vaccine if they can.
- This includes people who had the virus before and people who have not had the virus.
- It is really important for some groups to get the vaccine because it is hard for them to stay safe from COVID-19 and if they get the virus they are likely to get very sick. These groups include:
  - older adults
  - adults in First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations
  - people who are staying or working in certain high-risk places (for example, retirement homes, shelters and long-term hospital stays)
  - people who get a lot of home care visits, where someone comes in to help them
  - people with some chronic illnesses (for example, severe mental illness, diabetes and asthma).

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.

What if I am pregnant or breastfeeding?

- The vaccine has not been tested on those who are pregnant and/or breastfeeding yet.
- Since other vaccines are safe for those who are pregnant and/or breastfeeding, experts think the COVID-19 vaccine should be safe too.
- You should speak with your doctor or care team before getting the vaccine. They will go over the benefits and risks of vaccination and the risks of COVID-19 infection if you are pregnant and/or breastfeeding to see what is best for you.
- It is also important to tell the person giving you the vaccine that you are pregnant and/or breastfeeding.
What about my medications? Will the vaccine affect them?
- Most people who take medications don’t need to worry about how their medications mix with the vaccine. This is a good question to ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- If you take anticoagulants (blood thinners), you should tell the person giving you the vaccine so they can try to reduce any bruising you might get from the needle.

Do alcohol, cannabis or other drugs affect how the vaccine works?
- No, they do not. You do not need to stop drinking alcohol before or after the vaccine.
- However, because alcohol affects the immune system and how well vaccines work, people should try to avoid heavy drinking around the time of the vaccination.
- So far, there are no known problems with getting the vaccine if you use cannabis or other drugs.
- You should talk to your doctor or care team about your alcohol, cannabis and other drug use before getting the vaccine so you can create a safety plan.

Can I be allergic to the vaccine?
- Yes you can, but it is very unlikely. Most people will not be allergic to the vaccine.
- If you have an allergy to polyethylene glycol (PEG) you should not get the vaccine.
- Experts think the vaccine is still safe for people with most other allergies and those who have been allergic to other vaccines. That is because what is inside this vaccine is different than what is inside most other vaccines.
- There are also no metals, antibiotics or food products in the vaccine (which means no gelatin, so the vaccines are halal and kosher).

Why is it important for people with mental illness and/or addictions to get the vaccine?
- 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.
- This pandemic has been very hard for everyone, especially people with mental illness and those with drug or alcohol problems.
• 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 will I know when I can get the vaccine and how will I know where to go?
• Your doctor or care team member will let you know when you are able to get the vaccine and where to go.
• You can also check the Ontario Government COVID-19 vaccine website for updates: covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-vaccines-ontario

Do I have to pay for the vaccine?
• You do not have to pay for the vaccine.
• The Government of Canada is paying for everyone’s vaccine.
• If you get the vaccine, it will not change or cause problems with money that you get from the government. That includes disability support payments from the government (ODSP).

How do I decide if I want to get the vaccine?
• The best person to talk to about the vaccine is your doctor. You can also talk to family, friends or other people you trust.
• They can help you understand all of the information you need to think about.
• People whom you trust, like family and friends, can also help you talk to your doctor about the vaccine.
• This information sheet is also helpful.

What if I don’t want to get a vaccine? What are my rights?
• Getting the COVID-19 vaccine in Ontario is voluntary. You can discuss whether getting the vaccine is right for you with your doctor, care team members, family, and other people you trust.
• Before you get the vaccine, you will need to sign a form to show that you understand that you are getting the vaccine and that you agreed to get it. You can change your mind at any time before getting the vaccine. You can also ask for more information.
What if I have a substitute decision maker?

- If you have a substitute decision maker, then that person will make this decision for you. Your substitute decision maker will need to consider any thoughts you have expressed in the past about vaccination. If you didn’t say anything before about getting the vaccine, your substitute decision maker will decide if the vaccine is in your best interest.

- Before getting the vaccine, your substitute decision maker will sign the form on your behalf.

- Talk to your doctor if you want more information about your rights.

Notes