

# Virtual Town Hall: Disability Support Worker Immunization Information Session

## Alberta Community and Social Services and Alberta Health

### May 3, 2021

Please note that this document is a summary of ACDS' notes taken at this event. Clarification concerning any of the below information should be obtained from Alberta Health or Alberta Community and Social Services at [css.communication@gov.ab.ca](mailto:css.communication@gov.ab.ca).

#### **Panelists:**

Minister Rajan Sawhney [**MRS**] - Minister of Community and Social Services  
Dr Deena Hinshaw [**DDH**] - Chief Medical Officer of Health  
Dr Cheri Nijssen-Jordan [**DNJ**] – Vaccine Task Force Co-Lead  
Kristin Ward Diaz [**KWD**] – Acting as Moderator

~400 participants on the call

**MRS:** Thank you for joining this call as we know you are all very busy. It has been over a year since the pandemic began, but our priority has always been protecting vulnerable Albertans. Thank you to everyone for your dedication and efforts in keeping people safe. Disability support workers are now eligible for vaccination starting last week [April 30, 2021].

**DDH:** Thank you for your work supporting those with disabilities. Phase 2C of vaccinations includes disability support workers. Disability support workers are eligible to receive Moderna or Pfizer, no matter what age they are. These are both mRNA vaccines.

The majority of vaccines in our program are mRNA vaccines. Both vaccines have a small set of instructions (mRNA) that tell the body how to make the spike protein found in the COVID-19 virus. mRNA instructions make one tiny protein that sits on surface of COVID-19. The instructions are coated in a small bubble of fat that is transported into cells; these cells then make copies of the spike protein. Your immune system then creates antibodies to destroy the spike proteins. If you are then exposed to the real COVID-19 virus at a later date, your immune system will know how to fight it off. These vaccines cannot and do not change your DNA.

Common side effects include fatigue, aches, and fever. These are all normal reactions and a sign that the immune system is building immunity. These side effects are signals to tell our body to rest for a few days to help the body build up COVID-19 antibodies.

Less common side effects can include allergic reactions, swollen lymph nodes, and diarrhea. These occur in less than 1% of vaccine recipients. There are no safety concerns with Moderna and Pfizer. After your appointment, you will have to stay for 15 minutes in case you have an allergic reaction.

There are not many doses of the AstraZeneca [AZ] vaccine in our current vaccine program. This vaccine works differently – it has the same concept, but instructions are put into a different harmless virus; from there, the vaccine works similarly to mRNA vaccines.

1/100,000 to 1/250,000 of recipients of AZ can have a very rare but very serious blood clot. AZ is currently restricted to those who are 40+ years old to make sure the benefit is much higher from avoiding severe outcomes from COVID-19 than the potential risks of AZ.

**DNJ:** There are 3 ways to book an appointment.

1. Book your appointment at one of over 1,400 participating pharmacies throughout the province. Some pharmacies have one type of vaccine, but many have multiple types of vaccine.
2. Book through the AHS booking tool online. The booking tool walks you through the different groupings of eligible vaccine recipients (eg. eligible by age, healthcare workers, etc.). It takes between 5 and 7 minutes to complete your booking (at most times of day).
3. Call 811 and tell them you want to book your vaccine.

Each vaccination site has a way to access interpreters in case you are worried about a language barrier. All AHS sites should be wheelchair accessible.

When you arrive onsite, you will need verification to check your name (your ID) and your healthcare card (not mandatory but preferred). You will go through registration then to the immunizer. After getting your immunization, you must wait for 15 minutes to ensure you do not have an allergic reaction. The entire process takes, in most cases, 30 to 40 minutes.

**Q:** 2<sup>nd</sup> vaccine dose – when will we get it? Why is the interval between vaccines 4 months?

**A - DDH:** The time between doses has changed a few times in past few months. When Alberta first received vaccines in mid-December, vaccine doses were approximately 3 weeks apart. It was soon realized that people could get a high level of protection from the first dose, so the interval was changed to 42 days – the largest interval used in clinical trials.

In March, evidence became available from Quebec and UK with regards to extended intervals – protection from the first dose of Moderna/Pfizer was between 70-85% effective against severe outcomes and a 2-month interval between doses did not decrease efficacy. From studying other vaccines, it was found that the first dose is likely to remain effective for even longer than 2 months. Based on the available research, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization extended the maximum interval between doses to 4 months.

If there is greater vaccine supply, we will begin 2<sup>nd</sup> doses sooner than 4 months apart. Second doses will likely be administered at around a 3-month time frame from our current projections.

There is a faster pathway for people to get their second dose if they are profoundly immunocompromised.

**Q:** If you are positive with COVID-19 with no symptoms but then get the vaccine, what are your chances of getting sick/side effects?

**A - DDH:** There is no evidence that having COVID-19 first then getting vaccinated will make you more sick.

It is rare for someone to have already had COVID-19, get vaccinated, just to get COVID-19 again. After both doses there is about 95% protection which means that a small number of people could still get sick again. However, it is important to remember that the vaccine protects others as well as yourself.

There is also evidence that people with a mild COVID-19 infection are more likely to get blood clots in the few weeks/months following their COVID-19 infection.

**Q:** Will the pharmacy ask for a document to prove that you're a disability worker?

**A – DNJ:** Yes – you will need to bring a letter from your employer stating that you are a disability worker. This requirement may change in the next while.

Alberta Health has made a template, but if the letter you have does not follow the template, it would still suffice. It can be a very simple letter.

**Q:** Where can we access plain language resources regarding vaccination?

**A – DNJ:** Resources can be found on the Alberta Health website in easy language format. We will follow up this meeting with a plain language FAQ and one pager.

**Q:** Do people have the right to refuse care from workers who aren't vaccinated?

**A – DNJ:** There was a provincial decision to not require vaccination. However, if an individual who needs care indicates that they only want care from workers who are vaccinated, I don't believe there is a current answer on if that would be possible – we will follow up with a conversation with Alberta Labour.

Alberta Labour has been working on whether employers can require their workers to receive vaccines.

It is currently not mandatory for health care workers to have gotten the vaccine. Everyone still has to follow PPE, masking, and cleaning policies. It is considered a breach of your privacy as a health care provider to have to provide that information to anyone, as long as you are following PPE and cleaning guidelines.

**Q:** When will second doses be provided?

**A - DDH:** From the current available information, we estimate all adult Albertans can get their first dose by the end of June. Second doses will likely start in mid to late June for people vaccinated in mid-March. However, we will likely be able to move more quickly through second doses due to higher vaccine supplies.

**Q:** Can disability support workers attend vaccination appointments to support a client?

**A – DNJ:** Yes, we will accommodate that. In some clinics, the space is not very large, but we are trying to accommodate support workers wherever possible.

**DDH:** Some sites have created low stimulation environments in specialized locations. Two clinics exist in Calgary and Edmonton. Call 811 to access these sites, and identify your need for a low stimulus clinic to Health Link.

**Q:** How effective are vaccines against variants of concern?

**A – DDH:** Pfizer and AZ have been used extensively in the UK against the B117 variant – this is the dominant variant in Alberta right now. Both Pfizer/AZ work very well against this variant. Moderna works well too, with an expected 80% reduction in severe outcomes after the first dose.

The second dose is expected to be very effective against this variant – 95% for Moderna/Pfizer and ~80% for AZ. They are looking at information on if effectiveness can be boosted by recipients receiving different vaccines.

South Africa variant – AZ does not work as well to prevent infection but works well at preventing severe outcomes. Luckily, there are few of these cases in Alberta.

Brazilian variant – unsure of the efficacy at the moment, as there is currently little information available. There have been approximately 800 cases of this variant in Alberta. This is a part of the reason we need both vaccines and public health measures to prevent spread at this moment in time.

**Q:** How soon after you've had COVID can you get the vaccine?

**A – DNJ:** After you have completed your isolation **and** you are asymptomatic, you are then free to get the vaccine.

**Q:** Given the single site restriction, those of us who had two employers had to give up one employer. Once both workers and individuals get vaccinated, could we go back to work with both employers?

**A – DDH:** Single site restrictions are a legal regulation in licensed support homes, continuing care, etc. They are currently looking at actions to allow for more activities in these environments, and looking at eliminating single site restrictions. It is likely that lessening single site restrictions will wait until after an employee has received their 2<sup>nd</sup> dose.

We saw early in the pandemic that spread would sometimes stem from a worker operating at multiple sites. We have not yet decided whether we can remove this restriction as cases are extremely high at the moment.

**Q:** For those with severe immune deficiencies, is it still safe to go a full four months without a second dose?

**A – DDH:** We have set up guidelines and a list of who meets that criteria. If you think your condition is equivalent to the current list of people who are profoundly immunocompromised, talk to your physician. We did take feedback from physicians when evaluating and making the list of those who are eligible for faster second doses.

**Q:** When using the online booking tool, is there a way to know which vaccine you will receive?

**A – DNJ:** No. Only in the case of AZ will you know beforehand which vaccine you will receive. There is no way to determine beforehand if you will receive Moderna or Pfizer. If there is a particular need (eg. allergy issue) you may be able to request a specific vaccine, otherwise they are used interchangeably. You will have to rebook for another time if you have strong objections to the vaccine you are offered.

**Q:** Children 12 to 15 (turning 12 to 15 this calendar year) are now eligible; what needs to be provided for them to access vaccinations?

**A – DDH:** Those who are this age and have an issue on the 2B list of eligible underlying conditions were originally required to obtain a letter from their physician that the parent/guardian had been informed of the benefits and issues around vaccination. This was revealed to be a challenge for many families and physicians, so the process was changed. Now parents/guardians show up for appointment with the child, and will be provided with an information sheet to make sure the parent/guardian understands that the vaccines are not licensed for this age group. However, there is data from Pfizer from 2,000 – 3,000 children that show that the vaccine is effective and safe in this age range.

There is no longer a requirement to bring a doctor's note or proof of health condition. Parents/guardians will just be asked if the child has a chronic condition on the 2B list.

**Q:** What supports are available to those with severe special needs? Can they receive at their vaccination at home?

**A – DNJ:** There is a homebound vaccination program for those who cannot leave their home. If people can leave home for a medical appointment, they are expected to leave home to be vaccinated.

If this program applies to you or someone you know, phone Health Link; they will do a screening and then link you with the homebound program representative in your zone.

**Q:** If we can get sick whether we get vaccinated or not, is the vaccine to protect us or others?

**A – DNJ:** Both – for every dose administered, we avoid getting others sick as well as ourselves.

Please take the time to go on the Alberta Health website to determine if you are eligible for vaccination. Call your local pharmacist or Health Link and they will let you know if you are or are not eligible.

**KWD:** Any questions regarding this information session can be asked to the following email: [css.communication@gov.ab.ca](mailto:css.communication@gov.ab.ca)

**MRS:** If you would like to contact me personally with any questions, please email me at [css.minister@gov.ab.ca](mailto:css.minister@gov.ab.ca)

Thank you again for all your work – please feel free to reach out to me or reach out to the Government of Alberta Communications email linked above.