

COVID-19 Vaccination for Transplant Recipients Frequently Asked Questions

This FAQ will be updated as more information becomes available. Current information regarding vaccines is available through the Health Canada website as well as your local Health Unit site. If you have further questions, check with your doctor.

Does COVID-19 affect transplant patients?
Several organ transplant recipients have developed COVID-19. Some have had only mild symptoms while others have had a severe illness requiring admission to intensive care unit. There have been deaths in transplant recipients as a result of COVID-19. Transplant recipients have worse outcomes to COVID-19 than the general public. COVID-19 disease may be worse in some transplant patients because of the other medical conditions that they may also have (for example diabetes).
How do vaccines work?
Our immune system is the body's army against anything that it thinks does not belong in our body including viruses. Antibodies are one of the soldiers in this army. Vaccines contain a safe factor called an antigen that will tell the immune system including antibodies to fight against the virus. However, antibodies are only one of the soldiers in your immune system's army. There are several other soldiers that help fight including white blood cells.
How effective is the vaccine in transplant patients?
Vaccines approved by Health Canada have been shown to be very effective in the general population. <u>All of the approved vaccines were shown to be effective in preventing severe COVID-19 infection.</u> However, most of the first studies done looking at how effective the vaccines did not include transplant recipients. Studies have shown that transplant recipients will have an antibody response to the virus but it is lower than the general public. Remember though that antibodies are only one part of your immune system. Recent studies have also shown that some transplant recipients have a T-cell response to the vaccine. T-cells are white blood cells that make up another part of your immune system.
Can the COVID-19 vaccine harm my transplanted organ?
As the vaccine triggers your immune system, it is reasonable to ask whether this immune response can lead to rejection. The vaccine should not cause any harm to your transplanted organ since the immune response is targeted to attack the virus and not your new transplant. We do not believe that the vaccine will be harmful to your transplant.
Does the vaccine have side effects?
Side effects in general have been reported in 26% of study participants who received the vaccine compared to 12% of those who received the placebo. Reported side effects include fever, muscle aches, and fatigue. The CDC has noted that "Since April 2021, increased cases of myocarditis and pericarditis have been reported in the United States after mRNA COVID-19 vaccination (Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna), particularly in adolescents and young adults. In most cases, patients who presented for medical care have responded well to medications and rest and had prompt improvement of symptoms."
Is there anyone who should NOT get the vaccine?
People with a history of severe allergic reactions to vaccines or other medicines should talk to their transplant physician about getting the vaccine. The CDC states that this is a precaution, not a contraindication to getting the vaccine.
Can I get COVID-19 from the vaccine?
No. The vaccine does not contain live virus.
Should transplant recipients get vaccinated?
Like all vaccines, patients need to consider risks and benefits. Patients can always discuss vaccines with their individual transplant teams. So far studies in transplant patients have shown that the vaccines are safe in transplant patients and side effects are no different in transplant patients than the general public. Since the risk of serious disease is higher in transplant patients, it is recommended that transplant patients get the vaccine. It is very important that all family members, especially those in the same house, receive COVID-19 vaccine to prevent any infection spread from them.

Should transplant recipients get COVID-19 antibody testing?
<p>We know that the antibody response in transplant patients is less than in the general public. This is true for many vaccines that you will receive. Again, remember that antibodies are only one part of your immune system's response to the COVID-19. Therefore, an antibody test will not tell you the whole story of how effective a vaccine may be. Unless you are part of a study, antibody testing will give you very little useful information. Antibody testing is also not covered by OHIP.</p> <p>Currently there is a large-scale Canada wide study that is closely looking at antibody levels in transplant recipients. We will share these results once they are available.</p>
Which vaccine should I get?
<p>We recommend that you accept either Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna. AstraZeneca is not being offered.</p>
How many doses should I get?
<p>The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines require two doses. The timing of the second dose should not be delayed. Times are: Pfizer-BioNTech (3 weeks) and Moderna (4 weeks). Persons who received the AstraZeneca vaccine as their first dose can receive either Pfizer or Moderna as their second dose.</p>
Can I get a third dose?
<p>Currently, there are several studies looking at a third dose for transplant recipients. Early results show that a third shot may increase your antibody levels. The Canada's National Immunization Committee recommends the third dose for immunocompromised patients including transplant recipients. You may prefer to get the same vaccine as your earlier doses but if not available, the third dose can be either mRNA. They are interchangeable.</p>
Where can I get a vaccine?
<p>Currently 3rd dose vaccines are available for recipients at LHSC. Refer to our website for times and locations. Vaccines will be available at the vaccination centres in your community as well as some pharmacies and family doctors' offices.</p>
Do I need to get vaccinated if I have already been infected with COVID?
<p>Yes. The antibodies that are produced in response to COVID infections tend to decrease in levels within 3 months of the end of the infection. The natural immunity that occurs in response to an infection is varies and is not long lasting. It does not offer long-term protection. There have been reported cases of re-infection in patients who have recently recovered from COVID.</p>
Do I need to continue to take extra precautions once I am vaccinated?
<p>Yes. Even if you get the vaccine, it is very important for you to continue to wear masks, wash your hands and physically distance yourself from others, particularly when you are indoors.</p>
Can I be vaccinated against other infections?
<p>The CDC suggests that it is safe to receive other vaccines at the same time as you receive your COVID-19 vaccine. There are still some vaccines that we do not recommend be taken at the same time - follow your transplant team's advice.</p>
Can I get the vaccine if I currently have COVID-19?
<p>No. The vaccine should only be administered after recovery. You will need to be cleared for the vaccine after you recover from COVID-19 by your transplant physician.</p>

References:

Health Canada – COVID-19 Vaccines. www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/drugs-vaccines-treatments/vaccines.html

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www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/vaccine/COVID_19_medical_exceptions_vaccine_dose_intervals.pdf

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