

**Ministry of Health**

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**Ministère de la Santé**

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**Date:** March 8, 2021

**Memorandum to:** Medical Officers of Health  
Hospital CEOs

**From:** Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Health Ontario

**Subject:** **COVID-19 Vaccine Updates**

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As a follow-up to Friday's provincial announcement, I would like to provide further details about key changes to Ontario's COVID-19 vaccination program which will assist in accelerating our first dose vaccination efforts to ensure Ontarians receive a first dose of protection as quickly as possible.

**Changes to Second Dose Intervals**

To increase the number of individuals benefiting from a first dose of vaccine in the context of a limited COVID-19 vaccine supply, the province is following recommendations from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) to extend the time interval of the second dose of COVID-19 vaccines up to 16 weeks. This 16-week interval for the second dose applies to the three two-dose vaccines currently approved by Health Canada (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD).

- Current evidence from real-world experience with the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines indicates high vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic disease, hospitalization and death from COVID-19 for two months after the first dose, including among older populations. Clinical trials with the AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD vaccine indicate that vaccine efficacy increases with the length of the interval between doses over 12 weeks. Based on immunological principles, vaccine science and modelling, this short-term protection is not expected to rapidly wane.
- The effectiveness of an extended dose interval will be monitored and assessed, including effectiveness against variants of concern.
- Reducing the risk of hospitalizations and deaths at the population level remains a priority and will have great impact.

**This program transition to extend the interval between first and second dose to 16 weeks will occur on March 10th, 2021 at 00:01hr.**

The following groups will continue to receive vaccine at the initial intervals as described in the product monographs:

- residents of long-term care homes, retirement homes, Elder Care Lodges and Assisted Living facilities who are at the greatest risk of both exposure to COVID-19 and serious illness and death; and,
- remote and isolated First Nation communities (currently supported by Operation Remote Immunity) given the potential seriousness of COVID 19 infection in these communities with limited available health care facilities and resources. Further discussion on dosage intervals for administering to the Indigenous population beyond Operation Remote Immunity will occur.

We thank you for your assistance and recognize the additional work this change will cause as your teams reschedule appointments.

**Distribution of AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD COVID-19 vaccine**

In alignment with the recommendations from NACI, the AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD vaccine can be offered to all healthy Ontarians aged 18-64 years, without contraindications, if:

- the advantages of earlier vaccination outweigh the limitations of vaccinating with a less efficacious vaccine;
- the ease of transport, storage and handling of this vaccine facilitates access to vaccination which may otherwise be challenging; and
- informed consent is provided which includes discussion about current vaccine options (e.g. efficacy) and the timing of future vaccine options.

Beginning with Ontarians aged 60-64 years and then decreasing in age, the AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD vaccine will be offered with informed consent. Individuals over 65 years of age may also receive this vaccine product but must be advised about the potential benefits of waiting for a more efficacious vaccine.

While AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD has a lower vaccine effectiveness score than the mRNA vaccines, it is still significant and has been shown to reduce serious COVID-19 illness, hospitalization and death.

The delivery of this vaccine product will occur separate from Pfizer and Moderna, which will continue to follow the sequencing and prioritization set out for phases one and two of Ontario's plan.

Starting the week of March 8<sup>th</sup>:

- some pharmacies in Toronto, Kingston and Windsor-Essex will be allocated and begin to deliver the AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD vaccine, and
- primary care partners will also begin to deliver the AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD vaccine in Hamilton, Toronto, Guelph, Peterborough, Simcoe-Muskoka, and Peel.

Over the coming weeks, pharmacies and primary care partners in additional regions will be provided vaccine.

## Areas of Focus for Phase 2 Vaccinations

Ontario's Phase 2 vaccination rollout is expected to begin in April 2021, depending on vaccine availability. The target populations in Phase 2 are based on *age and risk* in order to prevent further death, hospitalization and transmission of COVID-19. People from the following groups will be offered vaccines:

- Adults aged 60-79, beginning with those 75 years of age and older, and decreasing in five-year increments over the course of the vaccine rollout
- People who live and/or work in high-risk congregate settings (e.g. shelters, community living) as well as some primary caregivers
- Individuals with high-risk chronic health conditions and some primary caregivers of those with highest risk health conditions
- People who live in hot spots with high rates of death, hospitalizations and transmission of infection
- Certain workers who cannot work from home, including but not limited to first responders, education workers and those in the food processing industry

We will continue to keep you apprised of changes to Ontario's COVID-19 situation and appreciate your ongoing partnership and dedication to this critical work.

Sincerely,



David C. Williams, MD, MHSc, FRCPC  
Chief Medical Officer of Health

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Helen Angus, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health  
Mario Di Tommaso, Deputy Minister, Ministry of the Solicitor General  
Richard Steele, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Long-Term Care  
Denise A. Cole, Deputy Minister, Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility  
Shawn Batise, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Indigenous Affairs  
Matthew Anderson, President and CEO, Ontario Health  
Ken Chan, Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of the Solicitor General  
Erin Hannah, Associate Deputy Minister, Ministry of Long-Term Care  
Alison Blair, Associate Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health  
Dr. Dirk Huyer, Chief Coroner, Ministry of the Solicitor General