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UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO | SCHOOL OF PHARMACY

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COVID-19 VACCINE MEDICAL EXEMPTIONS

Most people can safely get a Covid-19 vaccine. It helps protect people from getting severely ill or dying from Covid-19. Vaccines also lower the risk of spreading Covid-19 to others.

There are, however, a few valid reasons for **medical exemption** from getting the vaccine. This document was created to help people understand those reasons.

It will also explain situations that are **not reasons** for exemption from getting the vaccine, such as being pregnant, breastfeeding, or having had Covid-19 already. People can safely choose to get vaccinated in these circumstances. Details are provided below.

EXEMPTION 1

People who were diagnosed with myocarditis or pericarditis after dose 1 of a Covid-19 vaccine › They should not have dose 2 at this time.

↳ *People with prior myocarditis or pericarditis should speak to their medical team for advice.*

EXEMPTION 2

People who have a confirmed anaphylactic* allergy to an ingredient in a Covid-19 vaccine › They should be referred to an allergist for advice before dose 1.

OR

People who had an anaphylactic* allergic reaction to dose 1 of a Covid-19 vaccine › They should be referred to an allergist for advice before dose 2.

↳ *Many people who are worried they have an allergy to the Covid-19 vaccines have been able to get vaccinated under the guidance of an allergist.*

*An anaphylactic reaction is a severe reaction. It usually involves more than one body system (e.g., the skin, lungs, blood vessels, or gut). Symptoms usually develop quickly during the 15 minute monitoring period. Anaphylaxis must be treated with epinephrine (e.g., EpiPen®). Allergists are experts in identifying and treating anaphylaxis.

This guide was made by doctors, pharmacists, scientists, and patients in Canada. We used expert guidance and scientific evidence to answer questions about medical exemptions to Covid-19 vaccines.

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THE FOLLOWING REASONS ARE NOT REASONS FOR EXEMPTIONS

PREGNANCY

Pregnancy is not a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.
Covid-19 vaccines are recommended for pregnant people.[1] Covid-19 vaccines have been shown to be safe for use during pregnancy and may help protect against early birth, serious illness, and death.

Why?
Covid-19 infection can cause serious problems during pregnancy.[2,3] Pregnant people with Covid-19 infections are more likely to need intensive care than people who are not pregnant.[2,3] Pregnant people have a higher risk of dying from Covid-19 than people who are not pregnant.[3] If a pregnant person gets Covid-19, the baby may be born early and may need to be cared for in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).[2,3]

Pregnant people were not included in the earliest studies of the mRNA vaccines. Newer studies with thousands of people have found that mRNA vaccines are likely safe in pregnancy.[4,5] The side effects of vaccines are not known to be different for pregnant people.[3] Covid-19 vaccines are not known to cause miscarriage nor to harm developing babies.[3]

Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) both recommend that all pregnant people be offered Covid-19 vaccines.[1,2] Getting vaccinated will protect the pregnant person and the baby. People can be vaccinated at any point during pregnancy.[2]

FERTILITY

Fertility concerns are not a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.
Covid-19 vaccines are recommended for people who want to have children. There is no evidence that the Covid-19 vaccines affect male or female fertility, genes (DNA), hormones, implantation, or the healthy growth of babies.[2,6,7]

Why?
If someone does not get vaccinated and gets a Covid-19 infection during pregnancy, there is a higher risk of serious illness and problems during pregnancy.[2,3]

NACI, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC), and the Canadian Fertility and Andrology Society (CFAS) recommend that people who are considering or who may become pregnant at any time in the future be offered Covid-19 vaccines.[1,2,6]

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BREASTFEEDING (CHEST FEEDING)

Breastfeeding is not a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.

Covid-19 vaccines are recommended for people who are breastfeeding. There are no known risks of Covid-19 vaccines for breastfed babies.

Why?

The Canadian Pediatric Society states that parents can continue to breastfeed when infected with Covid-19.[8] Breastfeeding parents who have Covid-19 are advised to wear a mask when breastfeeding because it is possible to pass the infection to their baby.[8] The parent may need help to care for their baby if they become too ill to breastfeed.

Covid-19 vaccines protect people who are breastfeeding from a severe Covid-19 infection.[2,3] Covid-19 vaccines cannot cause infections in people who are breastfeeding or in babies.[3] Early data shows the vaccine does not pass into breastmilk after vaccination.[9] However, antibodies from the breastfeeding parent can pass into breastmilk.[10,11] This may help protect the baby from becoming infected but this is not yet known.

NACI and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada recommend that all people who are breastfeeding be offered Covid-19 vaccines.[1,2]

PREVIOUS INFECTION WITH COVID-19

Previous infection with Covid-19 is not currently a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.

Many people may build **some** immunity after a Covid-19 infection, but some do not.[12,13] We also do not know how long this protection lasts.[1] Available antibody tests do not tell us who is protected.[13]

Why?

Right now we can not tell who may be immune due to previous infection and who may not be. We also have data to show that Covid-19 vaccines result in higher antibody levels compared to Covid-19 infections.[14,15] As a result, it is safest to vaccinate everyone. There have been no problems reported from Covid-19 vaccines in people who have had previous Covid-19 infections, and vaccines may offer additional protection.[12]

Right now, NACI recommends two doses of an approved Covid-19 vaccine for people who have had a Covid-19 infection.[1]

Most people with Covid-19 infections can have the vaccine when their isolation ends and they are feeling well.[1] People who were treated for Covid-19 with monoclonal antibodies or covalescent plasma should wait 90 days before getting a Covid-19 vaccine.[16]

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ALLERGIES TO OTHER VACCINES

Allergic reactions to other vaccines are not a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.

Covid-19 vaccines are recommended for people who have had allergic reactions to other vaccines.

Why?

The Moderna and Pfizer mRNA Covid-19 vaccines have simple ingredients. It is very unlikely that someone with other allergies will have an allergic reaction to Covid-19 vaccines.

mRNA vaccine ingredients contain mRNA (instructions for making the spike protein) which is wrapped in a lipid (fat) envelope. The lipid envelope protects the mRNA until the cells of the body can use it. Sugars and salts keep the vaccine stable. mRNA Covid-19 vaccines do not contain most of the ingredients found in other vaccines.

The Canadian Society of Allergists and Clinical Immunologists (CSACI) recommends people ask their healthcare provider if the vaccine they reacted to contains any similar ingredients to the Covid-19 vaccine.[17] If not, they can be safely vaccinated.

OTHER ANAPHYLACTIC ALLERGIES
(E.G., FOODS, DRUGS, STINGING INSECTS, AND PLANTS)

Allergies, including anaphylaxis or contact dermatitis (skin allergy), to anything other than a vaccine ingredient are not a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.

Covid-19 vaccines are recommended for people who have anaphylactic allergies to other things. The mRNA Covid-19 vaccines have simple ingredients. It is very unlikely that someone with anaphylactic allergies to other things will have an allergic reaction to Covid-19 vaccines.

Why?

People who have an anaphylactic allergy to foods, drugs, stinging insects, or other things can be safely vaccinated against Covid-19.[17] A contact allergy to something like latex or nickel does not mean you are at risk of having an allergic reaction to the Covid-19 vaccine.

The Canadian Society of Allergists and Clinical Immunologists (CSACI) recommends people see an allergy specialist before being vaccinated for Covid-19 if they:[17]

a) Have a confirmed allergy to one of the ingredients of a Covid-19 vaccine; OR
b) Had an anaphylactic allergic reaction to dose 1 of a Covid-19 vaccine.

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SERIOUS HEALTH CONDITIONS

Having serious health conditions is not a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.

Covid-19 vaccines are recommended for most people who have serious health conditions, such as diabetes, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, liver disease, kidney disease, heart disease, and Parkinson's disease.[1]

Why?

Many people with serious health conditions have a higher risk of becoming severely ill or dying from Covid-19 infection.[16] People who have a complex health history should speak with their healthcare team for vaccination advice (i.e., how to time vaccines so they don't interfere with other treatments).

NACI recommends that most individuals be offered an mRNA vaccine, including those with serious health conditions.[1] People who take blood thinners can safely get Covid-19 vaccines.[1] Some people may even benefit from a third dose, including those with with organ transplants, certain cancers, or who take medications that suppress the immune system.[18]

> *People who were diagnosed with myocarditis or pericarditis after dose 1 of a Covid-19 vaccine should not have dose 2 at this time.*[1,19]
>
> *People who are followed by specialists because of prior myocarditis or pericarditis should speak to their medical team for advice about Covid-19 vaccines.*

MEDICATIONS THAT AFFECT THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

Taking medications that affect the immune system is not a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.

Covid-19 vaccines are recommended for most people who take medications that affect the immune system.[1,16]

Why?

People who take medications that weaken the immune system may be at higher risk of getting severely ill from a Covid-19 infection.

Some medication may reduce the immune system's response to vaccination. However, getting vaccinated makes sure that people have some protection from becoming severely ill or dying from Covid-19 infection. For some medications, there is special advice about the timing of vaccination. These medications include some drugs used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis (MS), inflammatory bowel disease, and cancer.

People who take medication that can weaken their immune system should speak with their medical team about the best time to schedule their Covid-19 vaccinations. People should get vaccinated as soon as possible.

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SEVERE ANXIETY ABOUT NEEDLES/MEDICAL VISITS

Severe anxiety about needles and medical visits is not usually a medical reason to be exempt from Covid-19 vaccination.

Some people have severe anxiety about needles or medical visits. A person with severe anxiety about needles/medical visits should speak with their healthcare team to learn about what supports they can access. Accommodations such as private rooms, a place to lie down, bringing a support person, and extra time can be offered at most vaccination sites.

In some communities, there are specialty clinics to help with severe anxiety about needles. Home visits, drive-through vaccine clinics, or vaccines given in a parking lot are also options. For milder anxieties, the CARD system (Comfort, Ask, Relax, Distract), or a numbing patch/cream may be helpful (https://immunize.ca/card).[20]

It is important to consider that medical care due to a Covid-19 infection will also be difficult for people with severe anxiety about needles/medical visits.

What are the vaccine options in Canada?

In Canada, there are 2 recommended vaccines: the Moderna (Spikevax) mRNA vaccine and the Pfizer (Comirnaty) mRNA vaccine. In Canada, mRNA vaccines are recommended as the preferred Covid-19 vaccines.[1]

AstraZeneca (Vaxzevria) and Janssen (Johnson & Johnson) are viral vector vaccines. Astra-Zeneca is no longer recommended due to rare side effects. It may be an option for people who cannot receive an mRNA vaccine. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is not available in Canada. It isn't known if it will be made available to Canadians.

Why are we talking about this?

Many people have unique health situations and may wonder how Covid-19 vaccine policies apply to them. It's okay to have questions. Most people can safely get a Covid-19 vaccine. The reason to get the Covid-19 vaccine is to be protected from getting very ill or dying from Covid-19. Vaccines also lower the risk of spreading Covid-19 to others. This document was created to help people understand medical reasons for vaccine exemptions.

This guide was made by a group of doctors, pharmacists, scientists, and patients in Canada who want to share accurate information. We used information from health and vaccine experts to answer questions about medical exemptions to Covid-19 mRNA vaccines. The information in this document is from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and medical specialty groups including the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) and the Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (CSACI).

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