

I have an autoimmune rheumatic disease*, should I get a vaccine for COVID-19?

Clinical trial results show that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. However, people with autoimmune rheumatic diseases were not part of those clinical trials, so we don't know how well these vaccines work in people with autoimmune rheumatic diseases. We do know with other vaccines, like the flu shot, people whose immune system activity is lowered by medications may have somewhat less protection from vaccination, although most people are usually still protected. Side effects are also usually not different from everyone else.

Should I get vaccinated now, or wait?

The Canadian Rheumatology Association has designed this pamphlet to help you decide with your healthcare provider which option is best for you.



*This decision aid is for you if you are an adult (age >18 years) and have an autoimmune rheumatic disease, which includes (but is not limited to) the following conditions: Adults living with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, Ankylosing spondylitis/spondyloarthritis, Behcet's disease, Myositis, Polymyalgia rheumatica, Psoriatic arthritis, Reactive arthritis, Relapsing polychondritis, Rheumatoid arthritis, Scleroderma, Sjogren's syndrome, Still's disease, Systemic lupus erythematosus, Vasculitis.



If you are pregnant or breast-feeding, additional considerations apply. Speak to your healthcare provider or visit [this site](#)¹ for more information.

How do the COVID-19 vaccines work?

All vaccines work by training your immune system to respond to an infection. They do this in different ways. Some, including COVID-19 vaccines in development, use a small, dead piece of the virus called a protein.

Others, including the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, give your cells instructions on how to make this protein. Your immune system learns to recognize this protein. If you become infected with the virus, your body gets rid of the infection so you do not become sick.

These vaccines do not contain live COVID-19 virus, so there is no chance of getting COVID-19 from them.

More detailed and up-to-date information on the available COVID-19 vaccines in Canada can be found on the Government of Canada [website](#).²

What are the **benefits** of the COVID-19 vaccine?

1

Preventing COVID-19 infection. These vaccines prevent 70% to 95% of COVID-19 infections in people who get the vaccines. This is even better than the annual flu vaccine, which prevents the flu around 40% to 60% of the time.

2

Reducing severity of COVID-19. COVID-19 is less severe in people who get the vaccine.

3

Protecting others. Getting vaccinated yourself may also protect people around you. As more people get vaccinated, we will see less COVID-19 spread.

What about side effects or risks?

Like all vaccines, there are some possible temporary side effects or risks of COVID-19 vaccine:



- sore arm where the injection was given
- temporarily swollen lymph nodes
- tiredness
- fever, chills
- headache
- general muscle or joint pain

These side effects usually wear off within a day or so, but some people can have reactions that last several days and could cause them to miss school, work, or family activities. The side effects from a second dose can be more noticeable because your immune system is now trained to recognize the part of the COVID-19 virus that is being delivered by the vaccine. Side effects vary from person to person.

What you need to know if you have an autoimmune rheumatic disease.

Is the vaccine still safe and effective?

We don't yet know about the side effects or how well COVID-19 vaccines work in people with autoimmune rheumatic diseases. People with these conditions were mostly excluded from COVID-19 vaccine trials.

We do know that other vaccines (e.g., flu vaccines), provide adequate protection for most people with autoimmune conditions, with side effects similar to the general population. Other vaccines do not usually trigger flares of autoimmune conditions. We'll continue to learn more about this as more people receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

These vaccines do not contain live COVID-19 virus, so there is no chance of getting COVID-19 from them.



There is a risk of allergic reactions in those people with allergies to a part of the COVID-19 vaccine, which can be severe. For this reason, you must remain under observation where you get the vaccine for at least 15 minutes after the vaccination (this is also true for other types of vaccinations).

More information on allergies to COVID-19 vaccines can be found on the [CDC website](#).³

What should I do with my regular medications if I decide to get the vaccine?

Some medications may reduce the protection you receive from the vaccine. While we do not yet have information on this specific to the COVID-19 vaccine, we do have information from other vaccines.



Rituximab, in particular, is known to reduce immune responses from vaccines. Other medications such as methotrexate or JAK inhibitors (tofacitinib (Xeljanz), baricitinib (Olumiant), upadacitinib (Rinvoq)) or prednisone at higher doses (>20 mg/day) may reduce protection after receiving certain vaccines, although most people are still protected. Your healthcare provider can help you decide what to do with your medications if you decide to get the vaccine.

For many patients, continuing medications is the best option to avoid disease flares.

Your options



1

Have the vaccine when available.

2

Wait for more information.

You may choose to have the vaccine now (if it's available to you in your area) or wait until more information is available.

Studies are being planned to understand how people with autoimmune conditions will respond to COVID-19 vaccines, although we do not know exactly when more information will be available.

NOTE: If you choose to receive the vaccine you must still follow public health measures and not assume you are protected completely from COVID-19, just like people without autoimmune conditions.

This decision aid, developed by the Canadian Rheumatology Association (CRA) and the Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance (CAPA), is intended for people with rheumatic disease who are considering COVID-19 vaccination, and is to be used in discussion with your doctor or another member of your healthcare team.

This decision aid is available on the [CRA website](#). You may reproduce and distribute an unedited copy of this document without additional permission. A free-of-charge, editable form of the decision aid is also available upon request for adaptation to other populations, provided it is not for commercial interests and the decision tool will be made freely and publicly available. Requests can be made to the CRA by email at info@rheum.ca.

Please note that the information in this decision aid reflects the general knowledge of the field at the date of publication. The Canadian Rheumatology Association accepts no responsibility or liability whatsoever for any errors or omissions.

References:

CRA Position Statement on Covid-19 Vaccination
rheum.ca/resources/publications/

¹ Shared Decision-Making: COVID Vaccination in Pregnancy Decision Aid (produced by a working group at the University of Massachusetts Medical School – Baystate)
bit.ly/2LMQUsn

² Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccines: Overview
bit.ly/3sF6DdG

³ COVID-19 Vaccines and Allergic Reactions
bit.ly/2M4Bpf8

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