
THE COVID-19 VACCINE AND PEOPLE WITH CANCER

FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTIONS

March 2021

Background

Québec is currently launching an age-based vaccination campaign against COVID-19. Published data show that older people are more at risk of death from COVID-19 complications. Since the risk to people with cancer is no higher than the risk to the elderly, the public health authorities have not recommended priority vaccination for people with cancer.

The vaccines available in Canada are safe and do not affect any cancer treatments that a patient may be receiving. However, some cancer treatments may reduce the immune response to the vaccine.

Below are answers to some of the most frequently-asked questions about the COVID-19 vaccine and adults with cancer. The information applies to the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines available in Québec. The AZ COVID-19 vaccine manufactured by AstraZeneca and the SII Covishield vaccine have also been authorized recently. Full information on the vaccination campaign and the vaccines themselves can be found on the Québec Government's website (see the links under Question 5).

Every person aged 18 or over should get the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to them, unless it is contra-indicated. There are currently no plans to vaccinate children, and any future decision to do so will be based on the findings of research into the safety and effectiveness of vaccines for children. The opinions below are based on the best available data and may be updated over time. .

Regardless of whether or not you are vaccinated, you must still continue to apply the measures recommended by the public health authorities to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

- ✓ Wash your hands
- ✓ Cover your face with a mask
- ✓ Cough into your elbow
- ✓ Keep your distance from other people
- ✓ Limit your travel
- ✓ Comply with other instructions as they are issued

1. ARE ALL COVID-19 VACCINES RISK-FREE FOR PEOPLE WITH CANCER?

Although the effects of COVID-19 vaccines have not yet been studied specifically in people with cancer, experience with other vaccines suggests that there should be no undesirable effects for them. Many countries have already vaccinated a lot of people with cancer, and no particular dangers have been identified.

The vaccines already available, and those to come, do not contain live virus products. They cannot therefore cause COVID-19 and may be used without risk on people with cancer. There are two types of vaccine, namely the messenger RNA vaccines (Moderna and Pfizer) and the viral vector-based vaccines (Astra Zeneca and SII). A messenger RNA vaccine should be used for people with weakened immune systems where possible. The vaccine teams are well aware of this.

2. WHEN WILL PEOPLE WITH CANCER BE IMMUNIZED (DEVELOP PROTECTION) AFTER RECEIVING A COVID-19 VACCINE?

Generally speaking, the best protection is achieved between seven and 14 days after the second vaccine dose. Other research is needed to determine actual levels of protection for people with cancer. People with weaker immune systems, including those who are receiving cancer treatments, may have a reduced vaccine response and may therefore not be fully protected against COVID-19. **It is important for everyone to continue to follow public health instructions, even after being vaccinated.**

3. WHAT IS THE BEST TIME FOR PEOPLE WITH CANCER TO RECEIVE THE COVID-19 VACCINE?

Where conditions permit, vaccines should ideally be given before cancer treatments begin.

However, in the general context of a serious pandemic or where the regional situation is critical, people with cancer should be vaccinated when the vaccine becomes available, because in these circumstances the risk of being infected with the COVID-19 virus is higher and it is best not to wait for the ideal time.

For patients already receiving cancer treatments that weaken their immune system, vaccination should ideally be offered when the effects of the treatments are at their lowest. If the risk of being exposed to COVID-19 is high, your physician may suggest that you be vaccinated regardless of your treatment. If you have had a bone marrow transplant, however, you must wait before being vaccinated, so that your system has time to recover from the transplant. Ask a member of your oncology team to recommend the best time for vaccination.

It is recommended that people with cancer who are not currently receiving treatment should be vaccinated as soon as the COVID-19 vaccine becomes available, unless it is contra-indicated. Oncology teams and vaccination services have been given recommendations for each type of treatment.

4. WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL UNDESIRABLE SIDE-EFFECTS OF VACCINATION?

The reported undesirable side-effects of the COVID-19 vaccines are generally mild to moderate and include pain, redness and occasional swelling at the injection site, as well as fatigue, headaches, muscle or bone pain, shivering, fever, heartburn and vomiting. They often resolve in a few days (see the links under Question 5).

You must consult a physician if these symptoms last more than 48 to 72 hours, since they resemble the symptoms

of COVID-19 or other infections.

If you have ever had an allergic reaction to a cancer medication, you must provide this information when registering for the vaccine, or when completing the questionnaire, in case the medication ingredients to which you are allergic are also in the COVID-19 vaccine.

If you undergo a mammography or other radiology examination after receiving the vaccine, you must inform the physician and radiology staff that you were recently vaccinated, and on which arm, because the vaccine sometimes causes lumps to appear on the ganglions (adenopathies) in the armpit of the vaccinated arm. These lumps will disappear within 10 days of the vaccine and you should not worry about them.

5. WHERE TO FIND INFORMATION ON THE AVAILABLE VACCINES AND THE VACCINATION CAMPAIGN

You can find information on COVID-19 vaccination on the Québec Government website:

<https://www.quebec.ca/sante/conseils-et-prevention/vaccination/vaccin-contre-la-covid-19/>

A Question-and-Answer page on the pandemic is also available on the Québec Government website. The page addresses a variety of subjects and is updated as the situation evolves: <https://www.quebec.ca/sante/problemes-de-sante/a-z/coronavirus-2019/reponses-questions-coronavirus-covid19/>

The Facebook page of the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) also provides information on the pandemic and vaccination: <https://www.facebook.com/SanteServicesSociauxQuebec>

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