**COVID-19 vaccines**

How to answer common questions from youth

**Quick facts**

* Youth aged 12 to 17 are eligible to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.
* This vaccine requires two doses to ensure full protection.
* It takes about two weeks after your second dose to receive peak protection.
* A study in the United States of 2,260 youth aged 12 to 15 found that the vaccine was 100% effective at preventing symptomatic COVID-19. Data suggest that the vaccine is effective against variants of concern.

**Questions and answers**

**Q: Most youth do not get really sick from COVID-19, so why do I need a vaccine?**

A: Recently, variants of concern are leading to more youth getting sick from COVID-19. Right now, the Delta variant is the most common variant of concern in Canada. Like other variants of concern, the Delta variant spreads more easily than the original virus. If we catch it, the Delta variant puts us more at risk for hospitalization than previous versions of the virus. Even if you are young and healthy, you can still get COVID-19. Getting a vaccine can protect you from getting sick from COVID-19 and its variants, including Delta.

Additionally, youth can get COVID-19 and not know it. This is called asymptomatic COVID-19. Even without any symptoms like a cough, you can spread COVID-19 without realizing it to parents, Elders, friends, and other people who are at risk of becoming really sick. Getting a vaccine means you are less likely to get sick, and therefore less likely to get others sick.

Think of the vaccine like a shield that can protect you from COVID-19. When more people around you get vaccinated (and become protected from COVID-19), your shield gets bigger. The bigger the shield, the harder it is for COVID-19 to get in and make us all sick. Getting a vaccine helps protect not only ourselves, but also the people around us who we care about, like parents, grandparents, Elders, teachers and our friends.

As more people become protected from COVID-19 by being vaccinated, we take a big step towards getting back to doing normal activities that you miss, like hanging out with friends, playing sports, and going to school. You can be part of the solution to COVID-19 by getting a vaccine.

**Q: Is the vaccine safe for youth?**

A: Yes, the COVID-19 vaccine is very safe for youth. Vaccines go through a long journey to make sure they are safe before they are offered to us.

When COVID-19 was discovered, scientists from all around the world started studying the virus to create a vaccine. They ran tests in labs to look for any safety issues before they started offering the vaccines to people. Then, they asked for volunteers to try the vaccine to find out if they had any side effects, and to figure out how much of the vaccine is best for us to take. Tens of thousands of people worldwide offered to help by getting a vaccine to see if it was safe and if it would stop them from getting sick with COVID-19. The scientists who created the vaccines kept a close eye on these people to see how they reacted, and to measure how well the vaccines worked in preventing COVID-19.

Once they were certain the vaccines worked very well and were safe for people to take, they asked our government for permission to offer the vaccines to the public, including you and me. Health Canada experts looked at all of the data the scientists had collected about the vaccine. They reviewed how well the vaccines work and the possible side effects and in the end, they agreed that these vaccines are safe for us to take and will help keep us from getting sick from COVID-19. As more people continue to get the vaccine, Health Canada keeps looking at all of the new information to make sure the vaccines are still safe – and they are! In fact, more than 1.7 million youth in Canada under the age of 18 have already received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. When studying how the COVID-19 vaccines would work on youth, scientists found that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was 95% effective at protecting youth over 16 and 100% effective at protecting youth between 12 and 15 against COVID-19.

**Q: How does the vaccine work?**

A: Youth between 12 and 17 can get the Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA vaccine. This kind of vaccine delivers instructions to our bodies on how to recognize the COVID-19 virus. These instructions help our bodies to start building an army of cells specifically made to fight COVID-19. This army stands ready to help us fight off COVID-19 if we are exposed. The COVID-19 vaccine does not interact with our DNA or change it in any way.

**Q: Is the vaccine being tested on us?**

No, the COVID-19 vaccine is not being tested on any of us – neither on youth nor on adults. When each of the approved COVID-19 vaccines were created, they were tested on tens of thousands of adult volunteers from around the world to make sure they were safe. Medical professionals and our government scientists only let adults start getting a vaccine once they were confident nothing bad would happen to us.

Until recently, the Government did not have enough information about how any of the vaccines would affect youth. In the United States, more than 2,000 youth volunteers between the ages of 12 and 15 agreed to try the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to see if it was as safe and worked as well in youth as in adults. That study found that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine – the one that youth can get here in Canada – prevented those youth from getting really sick with COVID-19. So, the vaccine has already been tested on other youth who offered to help. The Government is not testing the vaccine on you. Indigenous youth are being offered the vaccine quickly because they are more likely than other Canadians to become very sick from COVID-19. In Canada, more than 1.7 million Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth under 18 have already received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

**Q: Will the vaccine make me sick?**

No, the vaccine will not make you sick and it will not give you COVID-19. The vaccines do not have the COVID-19 virus in them. You might have some mild side effects after getting the first or second dose of the vaccine. This is completely normal; in fact, it usually means that your body is doing a great job getting ready to fight COVID-19 and protect you.

Many people who get the vaccine have a sore arm where the needle goes in. It is also normal to feel really tired, or to have a fever. Some people get body chills – if you have ever had the flu, you have probably experienced that shaky, cold feeling. The good thing is that these side effects usually only last for a few days, and then you will feel back to normal!

Rarely, some people have severe allergic reactions to vaccines and will need help from a medical professional. This is why you will be monitored at the vaccination clinic for 15 minutes after you receive your vaccination.

While serious side effects are rare, if you experience any unusual symptoms, contact your local health centre or doctor.

**Q: I am nervous to get the vaccine/I am afraid of needles.**

It is completely normal to be nervous to get a vaccine or to be afraid of the needle. Getting injections is not something we do every day, so it is understandable that you might feel scared. Most people feel a small pinch from the needle, and the pain is over in a few seconds. Talk to trusted family members and friends about your fears and ask for their support. Tell the health care worker who is giving you the needle that you are feeling nervous, and if you have ever fainted when you have received a needle. They may offer some helpful techniques or distractions when you are getting the vaccine. Keep your arm relaxed and breathe deeply to feel calm. It may also help to distract yourself by using headphones to listen to music or watch a video while you receive the vaccine.

**Q: Do I still have to wear a mask if I get a vaccine?**

Yes, it is still very important to keep following public health measures even after you get vaccinated. In many public places in Ontario, this still means staying two metres apart from people who you do not live with, wearing a mask, avoiding places with a lot of people, and washing your hands often. There are a few reasons for this. It takes up to two weeks after receiving your second vaccine dose for your body to gain protection against COVID-19. Additionally, these actions help to protect people who have not been vaccinated from getting COVID-19. And while the vaccines work really well to protect us, there is a small chance you may still get COVID-19. So, protect yourself and those around you by following local public health measures after vaccination.

**Q: What happens when I go to get the vaccine?**

When you arrive to get your vaccine, you and your parent or guardian will probably be asked a few questions to confirm your health information. Then you will meet the health care worker who will give you your vaccine. You may get to choose which arm you would like to get the vaccine in. They will clean a small spot on your arm, near your shoulder. They will prepare a small needle with the vaccine and put the needle into your arm. You might feel a small pinch when the needle goes into your arm, but it is over in just a few seconds. After you have received your vaccine, you will have to wait for 15 minutes before you can leave. This is to make sure you do not have an allergic or serious reaction to the vaccine, which is very rare. After 15 minutes, you can go home and rest. To be fully protected, you will need to get a second dose of the vaccine a few weeks after your first dose.

**Q: Do I have to get the vaccine?**

No, you do not have to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Getting vaccinated is a choice.

In Ontario, anyone who is eligible to receive a vaccine will only get one if they give what is called “informed consent.” This includes youth aged 12 to 17. To give informed consent, you must have the ability to make the decision on your own to receive the vaccine. This means that you must be able to understand what vaccination involves, why it is being recommended, and the risks and benefits of getting a vaccine or refusing to get a vaccine. Even though youth may be able to decide for themselves whether or not to get a vaccine, it is a good idea to talk to a parent, guardian, or other trusted adult, like a teacher or nurse, to help you answer any questions and prepare. If you cannot give informed consent, you will need permission from your parent, guardian, or other substitute decision-maker.

By getting the COVID-19 vaccine, you will protect yourself and you will help prevent the virus from spreading to your family and those in your community who may be more likely to get sick. This includes Elders and older adults, and people with medical conditions that make it more likely for them to get severely ill or die. By choosing to get a COVID-19 vaccine, you will be part of the solution and help us all get closer to living normal lives.

**Q: Does the COVID-19 vaccine cause infertility?**
There is no evidence that getting a COVID-19 vaccine causes fertility problems. If you are pregnant, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization recommends that you get an mRNA vaccine, like the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, while you are pregnant. If you get COVID-19 while you are pregnant, you may be more at risk of becoming severely ill, having more serious health outcomes, or needing intensive care. Getting a COVID-19 vaccine can help to protect you.

**Q: The pandemic has been difficult and I am feeling anxious or stressed. Where can I get help?**

If you are feeling unhappy, stressed, or struggling with how you are feeling, you can call the Hope for Wellness Help Line at 1-855-242-3310. Or, you can use the online chat at hopeforwellness.ca. These services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**Additional resources**

Here are some additional websites you can use to find more information about COVID-19 and vaccines.

**Government of Canada resources**

[COVID-19 vaccines and Indigenous peoples – Government of Canada](http://sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1606941379837/1606941507767)

[About the Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccine – Government of Canada](https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/covid19-industry/drugs-vaccines-treatments/vaccines/pfizer-biontech.html)

[How COVID-19 vaccines are distributed – Government of Canada](https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1620412186587/1620412205798)

[COVID-19 vaccine safety and possible side effects – Government of Canada](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/vaccination-children/safety-concerns-side-effects.html)

[COVID-19 vaccine safety weekly reports – Government of Canada](https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/vaccine-safety/)

[What to expect at your vaccination – Government of Canada](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/vaccines/what-expect-vaccination.html)

[Life after vaccination – Government of Canada](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/awareness-resources/vaccinated-against-covid-19/vaccinated-against-covid-19-en.pdf)

[What does being vaccinated mean for me? Guidance on gatherings – Government of Canada](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/awareness-resources/vaccinated-against-covid-19-public-health-measures/vaccinated-against-covid-19-public-health-measures.pdf)

**Government of Ontario resources**

[Government of Ontario COVID-19 Homepage](https://covid-19.ontario.ca/index.html)

[What youth need to know about their COVID-19 vaccine appointment – Government of Ontario](https://health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/vaccine/COVID-19_what_youth_need_to_know.pdf)

[COVID-19 Vaccine Information Sheet for Youth (12-17) – Government of Ontario](https://health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/vaccine/COVID-19_vaccine_information_sheet_youth.pdf)

**Other resources**

[Anishinabe Youth Network Facebook Page](https://www.facebook.com/AnishinabeYouthNetwork/)

[Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority Facebook Page](https://www.facebook.com/SLFNHA/) and [Website](https://www.slfnha.com/covid/what-is-covid-19/)

[Six Nations COVID-19 Website](https://www.sixnationscovid19.ca/)

[Weeneebayko Area Health Authority Website](https://www.waha.ca/)