



Immunizations & COVID-19

Updated December 2020

Immunizations in the Canadian Context

Immunization is a proven, safe, and effective public health measure that prevents infectious disease. Since the first mass immunization campaigns against pertussis after World War I to the current widespread adoption of robust infant and child immunization schedules, Canada has consistently supported immunization as a pillar of our national and provincial public health strategy.ⁱ The result of our commitment and collective action has been a reduction in disease prevalence, an eradication of some diseases such as smallpox, and a massive reduction in death and disability from vaccine preventable diseases.

The scientific evidence and consensus is unequivocal: immunization saves lives and is a highly effective public health measure. However, public trust in immunization has never been universal and continues to be challenged by misinformation, fear, and anti-immunization advocacy. During a time of global pandemic when citizens are living with high levels of uncertainty and fear, gaps in public trust for immunization have the potential to become significant barriers to future immunization efforts when COVID-19 vaccines become available.

COVID-19 Vaccine

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) encouraged people to keep up with immunization schedules, reminding people that immunization is an essential service.ⁱⁱ The World Health Organization concurred and issued an Immunization During COVID-19 fact sheet.ⁱⁱⁱ From global to national to provincial levels, immunization continues to be explicitly named as a strategy to reduce disease burden during COVID-19, alongside physical distancing, isolating at home, hand and respiratory hygiene, and other public health interventions. Immunization has also been identified as a one possible “solution” to COVID-19, with many public health officials, elected representatives, and health organizations identifying mass COVID-19 immunization as one possible resolution to this global pandemic.

As of early December 2020, there were 10 vaccine candidates for COVID-19 in phase 3 trials and several others in the phase 2/3 stages of clinical trials.^{iv} Those with the most media discussion to date in North America and Europe are manufactured by Moderna, Pfizer and AstraZeneca. On December 1, 2020 British authorities announced approval of the Pfizer vaccine for use (roll out has begun) and on December 7, 2020 the Prime Minister announced that the Pfizer vaccine would become available as early as mid-December in limited numbers to start with across Canada. On December 8, Premier Horgan announced that in British Columbia approximately 4,000 high-risk individuals will be vaccinated ‘by the end of next week’.

Additional vaccines are likely to follow, the federal government having secured doses of the top three vaccine candidates from Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca. Details for a roll-out both in the early and later stages are being finalized by federal and provincial governments as additional potential vaccine candidates continue to finalize their phase 3 trials, and as Health Canada continues its review each of them to ensure both safety and efficacy. As noted, the distribution of the Pfizer vaccine is imminent but there are other candidates which are also being reviewed.

With a COVID-19 vaccine arriving soon it is nurses who will be at the forefront of the immunization process by not only administering vaccinations, but also in helping people understand the benefits, safety and efficacy of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Nurses: Leaders and Partners in Immunization

Nursing has a well-established history at the forefront of immunization and immunization advocacy. Indeed, nursing is identified in Canada’s National Immunization Strategy as not only critical contributors to vaccine access enabling immunization coverage goals but also as provincial level partners in immunization program



planning, monitors in the national Active Surveillance System, and the largest workforce supporting public and patient education on immunization^v (Nurses are front line workers immunizing Canadians, immunization and public health researchers, public health and social policy leaders, and recognized experts in immunization care planning for diverse vulnerable populations.

As the world prepares for and rolls out a COVID-19 vaccine, nurses are working tirelessly to address other factors likely to influence both population health and health system responsiveness over the intervening time. For example, nurses are on the frontlines of British Columbia's opioid overdose public health emergency, integrated across all levels of provincial harm reduction strategies and services. Indeed, recent changes to the nursing scope of practice targeted an expanded role for nurses in this crisis.

In addition, influenza season is upon us and with it comes a need for increased testing to differentiate influenza symptoms from COVID-19 symptoms as well as influenza immunization education and mass administration. Every day, the work of COVID-19 testing and influenza immunization is carried out by public health nurses all across our province. Their nursing work supports public compliance with seasonal influenza immunization and COVID-19 case identification/contact tracing, critical activities that keep our acute care system available for COVID-19 response and ensure our communities stay as healthy as possible.

As the largest group of care providers in our health care system and as established leaders in health, nurses are the foundation of public health response in Canada. However, our contribution goes beyond our usefulness and strength in numbers. Nurses have consistently been identified as the most trusted profession in our country. Research evidence has identified that *trust* is the key driver in vaccine compliance. Nurses are in a unique position to build the trusting relationships that support immunization uptake, whether part of a regular immunization schedule, seasonal influenza, or a COVID-19 vaccine.

Key Messages

- Immunization is a safe and effective public health strategy to prevent and/or lessen the severity of vaccine preventable diseases.
- NNPBC encourages the use of immunization as a safe and effective public health strategy.
- NNPBC encourages people to make decisions on immunization based on scientific evidence and consensus.
- NNPBC encourages people to ensure their children receive immunizations on time and to continue with immunization schedules during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Nurses have been and continue to be at the forefront of immunization and immunization advocacy.
- Nurses possess the leadership, knowledge, practical experience, relational expertise and hold the public's trust.
- Evidence supports trust as *the* key driver of vaccine compliance. Nurses are the most trusted profession in Canada and are uniquely positioned to build the trusting relationships that support public trust in immunization and adoption of immunization for population health.
- NNPBC recognizes the diligence of the Health Canada review of COVID-19 vaccines and recognizes that nurses will be at the forefront of a COVID-19 roll-out.
- Public health teams, which are comprised largely of nurses, are working with overlapping and complex health emergencies and needs such as COVID-19, the opioid crisis, seasonal influenza management, and infant immunization clinics etc.
- NNPBC understands that while nursing is well positioned to be at the forefront of public health teams, these overlapping public health concerns are complex to manage and will stretch the capacity of often understaffed and under-resourced public health teams.



- Acknowledging and working with the complexity of nursing work in the context of COVID-19 will support preparedness and workforce readiness for future COVID-19 immunization campaigns.
- NNPBC supports collaboration and consultation with amongst all nursing designations and with other health providers to ensure the 'voices' of nurses and health professionals are clearly heard in matters of health and public policy.

Further Reading/Resources

- [NNPBC COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [BCCDC](#)
- [BCCDC and BC Government Vaccinations and COVID-19](#)
- [WHO- Immunization in the Context of COVID-19](#)
- [WHO Draft Landscape of COVID-19 Vaccinations](#)
- [Immunize BC- Immunizations During COVID-19](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada- Immunizations During COVID-19](#)

NNPBC would like to thank RN Council Members Sherri Kensall and Angela Wignall for their work on this Issues Summary.

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.

ⁱ Canadian Public Health Association. (2020). *Immunization timeline*. Retrieved from <https://www.cpha.ca/immunization-timeline>

ⁱⁱ BCCDC, <http://www.bccdc.ca/about/news-stories/stories/2020/bccdc-promotes-keeping-up-with-immunizations-during-covid-19-pandemic>. Accessed July 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ WHO. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/immunization-in-the-context-of-covid-19-pandemic>. Accessed July 2020.

^{iv} Raps COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker

^v Advisory Committee on Population Health and Health Security (ACPHHS). (2003). *National immunization strategy (NIS): Final report 2003*. Retrieved from https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/migration/phac-aspc/publicat/nis-sni-03/pdf/nat_imm_strat_e.pdf