

Q&A for Healthcare Providers

Fall Immunization Program: Questions & Answers:

COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine

How is the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine different from previous COVID-19 vaccines?

- The COVID-19 vaccine containing the XBB.1.5 component is anticipated to provide a better immune response against current circulating strains, compared to earlier formulations.

Will the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine protect against emerging variants?

- Current evidence indicates that the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine has the potential to provide protection against emerging variants.
- Individuals immunized with the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine are expected to benefit from a better immune response against circulating strains, compared to earlier formulations. Preliminary clinical data demonstrated that a dose of the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine generated similar immune responses against XBB sub-lineages XBB.1.5, XBB.1.16 and XBB.2.3.2.
- Moderna published data showing their COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine generated immune response against emerging sub-lineages.

Who is eligible for a dose of the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine?

- Starting October 16, Albertans 6 months of age and older can be immunized with the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine. This dose is most important for those at increased risk of COVID-19 infection or severe disease.
- Appointments can be booked starting October 10, by [booking online \(pharmacy or AHS clinic\)](#), directly contacting a [community pharmacy](#) (for ages 5 years and older), community medical clinic, or by calling 811. However, appointments won't be available until October 16.
- **Note** These doses will be offered if at least 3 months have passed since a last dose. It is recommended to wait at least 3 months after a positive test for COVID-19 infection.

I have yet to receive any COVID-19 vaccine doses. Can I receive the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine as my very first dose?

- Yes. Health Canada has approved the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine for use in individuals who have not previously received a COVID-19 vaccine.
- NACI also published guidance recommending the use of the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine in individuals who have not previously get a COVID-19 vaccine.

How long do I have to wait after my last COVID-19 dose to get the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine dose?

- Albertans 5 years of age and older can receive the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine if at least 3 months have passed from the last COVID-19 vaccine dose. It is recommended to wait at least 3 months after a positive COVID19 test.
 - Albertans 6 months to four years of age and those who are immunocompromised should refer to the [COVID-19 vaccine schedule](#) for scheduling and spacing details.

I recently had a COVID-19 infection. Do I need to get the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine? How long do I have to wait after having a COVID-19 infection to get the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine?

- Individuals who have had a COVID-19 infection still benefit from immunization. Immunity from both infection and vaccine is called “hybrid immunity”, and it provides more protection than infection alone.
- It is recommended to wait 3 months from a positive COVID-19 test, which indicates COVID-19 infection, before receiving the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine.

Does this mean that a COVID-19 vaccine dose is needed every 3 months?

- Not currently. As research on COVID-19 evolves, we continue to learn more about the optimal timing and spacing of vaccine doses. Guidance on next doses will depend on circulating variants and the seasonality of COVID-19 infection. It could become an annual vaccine like influenza; however, not enough evidence is currently available.

Will the COVID-19 bivalent vaccines continue be offered in Alberta now that the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine is available?

- The COVID-19 bivalent vaccines will no longer be offered in Alberta.

Which COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine will be available in Alberta?

- At this time, only mRNA vaccines have been approved by Health Canada.
 - Moderna XBB.1.5 is available to Albertans aged 6 months and older.
 - Pfizer-BioNTech XBB.1.5 is available to Albertans 12 years and older. The availability to 5 to 11 years is expected in the coming month.
 - For most individuals, they should receive any mRNA vaccine that is available to them.
- non-mRNA vaccines have not yet been approved by Health Canada; approval is expected in the coming months.
 - Novavax XBB.1.5 will be available to individuals aged 12 years and older (once approved).

Which COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine should I get?

- For most individuals, they should receive any mRNA XBB.1.5 vaccine that is available to them. However, individuals who may have experienced a severe allergic reaction to the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, they may receive a non-mRNA XBB.1.5 vaccines (once approved in Canada).
 - As Alberta’s government now treats COVID-19 as endemic, the province will be sourcing and offering COVID-19 vaccines using similar practices as we do for other provincially funded immunization programs.
 - Because of this approach Albertans will not be provided with a choice of brands of mRNA COVID-19 vaccines.
- Current evidence indicates that all COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccines that will be available in Alberta have the potential to provide protection against emerging variants.
- Individuals immunized with the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccines are expected to benefit from a better immune response against circulating strains, compared to earlier formulations. Preliminary clinical data demonstrated that a dose of the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine generated similar immune responses against XBB sub-lineages XBB.1.5, XBB.1.16 and XBB.2.3.2.
- Immunizers will discuss specific situations and needs at the immunization appointment.

COVID-19 and Influenza Immunization Programs

Why are individuals living in senior congregate care settings prioritized in the offering of the COVID-19 vaccine and influenza vaccine?

- Starting the week of October 2, residents living in senior congregate care settings will be offered COVID-19 and influenza immunizations through their facilities with the support of facility staff, pharmacists, and Alberta Health Services (AHS).

- Residents of senior congregate care facilities are considered at higher-risk of severe outcome of infection, as they are more likely to have underlying health conditions with no easy access to immunization services in the community.
- This group will be offered COVID-19 and influenza vaccines on-site as part of the Alberta Outreach program beginning the week of October 2.

When will COVID-19 and influenza vaccines be available?

- COVID-19 and influenza vaccines will be available for outreach to high-risk settings starting the week of October 2.
- The general public will be able to access COVID-19 and influenza vaccines starting on October 16.
- The COVID-19 vaccine may be offered to eligible individuals at their influenza vaccine appointment; a separate COVID-19 immunization appointment is not needed.

How do I book an appointment to receive the COVID-19 XBB.1.5 vaccine and the influenza vaccine at the same time?

- **Alberta Vaccine Booking System (AVBS):** Albertans can book a COVID-19 vaccine appointment and an influenza vaccine appointment back-to-back in AVBS where appointments are available. Appointment schedules are set by individual pharmacies and AHS. Follow this [link](#) to book your appointments online.
- **Pharmacy & community medical clinics:** If receiving your vaccine at a local pharmacy or community medical clinic, you can call them directly to arrange an appointment. Be sure to inform the individual you are speaking to that you would like both vaccines. Many [community pharmacies](#) accept walk-ins for individuals 5 years of age and older.
- **Health Link:** appointments for a COVID-19 and influenza vaccines can also be made by calling Health Link at 811.

What is the purpose of AVBS in relation to the COVID-19 vaccine XBB?

- The AVBS booking system is designed to facilitate the scheduling of appointments for the Influenza and COVID-19 vaccine. It is not a clinical decision support tool, but rather a tool to assist Albertans in booking immunization appointments.

What changes are occurring in AVBS?

- Like the influenza vaccine, booking of COVID-19 vaccine XBB immunization appointments through AVBS take place without pre-assessment for eligibility during the booking process. Clinicians will be responsible for confirming eligibility before administering the vaccine.

Will individuals be assessed for vaccine eligibility when using the AVBS booking system?

- The AVBS system will not pre-assess individuals for eligibility when booking appointments for the COVID-19 vaccine XBB. However, eligibility checks are still a crucial step in the immunization process and are the responsibility of the immunization provider.

What should individuals do to verify their eligibility for the COVID-19 vaccine XBB?

- Individuals can verify their eligibility for the COVID-19 vaccine XBB by following the provided link on the booking page. It is important for them to check that they meet the eligibility criteria before their appointment.

Is it safe to receive the COVID-19 vaccine and the influenza vaccine at the same appointment?

- Yes, it is safe to receive both vaccines at the same time.
- No safety concerns have been identified to date in the extensive adverse event monitoring that has been done, including after offering COVID-19 and influenza vaccines together in Alberta for the past two influenza seasons.

- Both the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and the Alberta Advisory Committee on Immunization (AACI) agree that co-administration of COVID-19 vaccine and other vaccines (including influenza vaccine) is acceptable.

Will First Nations People have access to COVID-19 and influenza vaccine on reserve? What about off-reserve?

- Yes. First Nations People can receive their COVID-19 and influenza vaccine at their public health clinic on reserve.
- First Nations People off reserve and Metis citizens can book an appointment through the AVBS online booking tool, by calling 811 or through their community medical clinic. Most pharmacies also have a walk-in option.

Can I book and get my influenza vaccine even if I don't want a COVID-19 vaccine?

- Yes. We encourage you to speak to a pharmacist, your doctor or other healthcare provider about any concerns you may have about the COVID-19 vaccine.

If I get infected by influenza and COVID-19 at the same time, will I get sicker?

- Both viruses can lead to very severe illness, so if you are infected with both at the same time, you could experience symptoms that are worse than if you were infected with only one of the viruses.

What additional steps can I take to make sure I don't get COVID-19 and/or influenza?

- Additional precautions to protect yourself from the spread of respiratory viruses include:
 - Staying home when feeling sick;
 - Avoiding close contact with people who are sick, whenever possible;
 - Washing hands frequently with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer;
 - Covering coughs and sneezes, followed by cleaning of hands;
 - Avoiding touching eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands;
 - Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces and items at home, especially when someone is sick; and
 - Wearing a well-fitting mask in crowded indoor spaces to help reduce the risk of becoming sick and to help protect others from being exposed.

Who is at an increased risk of COVID-19 and influenza infection or severe disease?

- Those who are at an increased risk of contracting respiratory viruses like COVID-19 and Influenza, include:
 - Adults 65 years of age or older;
 - Residents of long-term care homes and other congregate living settings;
 - Individuals with underlying medical conditions or compromised immune systems that place them at higher risk of severe COVID-19 and influenza illnesses;
 - Individuals who are pregnant;
 - Individuals in or from First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities;
 - Members of racialized and other equity-denied communities;
 - People who provide essential community services and healthcare workers.

What are we seeing so far in the way of respiratory viruses this season? Are we seeing spikes in Influenza, COVID-19 or RSV cases yet?

- It is still very early in the season, but respiratory viruses are on the increase with Rhinovirus/Enterovirus (common cold viruses) leading the way and SARS-CoV-2 closely behind.
- Compared to this time last year there appears to be fewer positive tests for both COVID-19 and Rhinovirus/Enterovirus.

Do we have any predictions on what the season will look like? (What did we see in others places like Australia that might be a preview of our respiratory illness season?)

- Based on Australia's Influenza season and other southern hemisphere activity, it is likely for Alberta to see a predominately H1N1/ influenza season.
- Overall Australia's influenza season was less intensive and severe as last season however, cases were above the 5 year average. Australia had a predominate H1N1 season with influenza B Victoria lineage second.
- As expected with a H1N1 and influenza B predominate season, rates were highest in children aged 05–09 years, followed by those aged 0–04 years and those aged 10–14 years.
- 72% of people admitted with confirmed influenza across sentinel hospital sites were children aged younger than 16 years, 17% were adults aged 16 to 64 years, and 11% were adults aged 65 years or older.