Overview

Since the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out began in December 2020, we have been receiving questions from staff, physicians, partners and the public on COVID-19 immunization sequencing - who will be immunized when, in what order, and why some groups are chosen to go before others.

We truly wish everyone could be immunized right away. Within these early phases, there simply isn’t enough vaccine for all health care workers. In the earliest phases of vaccine roll out, there is only enough vaccine for residents of long term care (LTC) and designated supportive living (DSL) facilities, age-groups of seniors who have been hardest hit and some healthcare workers. The reality is that it’s going to take several months for all health care workers to be offered COVID-19 immunization.

Fundamentally, the major issue we face right now is vaccine supply. There is insufficient vaccine available to immunize our entire workforce at once. Because there is not currently enough vaccine, decisions have to be made about sequencing of the vaccine rollout.

We hope the information below will help provide further background on immunization sequencing, rationale behind decisions and insight into the immunization rollout process.

Principles Used by the Government of Alberta to Determine Groups Included in Phase 1

Alberta’s COVID-19 Immunization Program launched in December 2020. With not enough vaccine available to offer immunizations to everyone at the same time, Alberta Health established a phased approach aligned with anticipated vaccine supply.

COVID-19 immunization roll-out takes into account groups that have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. This includes older Albertans and in particular those living in LTC and DSL facilities.

The sequencing of health care workers across phases acknowledges the tremendous impact COVID-19 has had on the healthcare system’s ability to deliver care and support patients and residents in moving through the system. The need to prevent outbreaks that further impair health system capacity and flow was also considered.

Healthcare workers including physicians were sequenced with consideration of the extent to which immunizing a particular group would contribute to a combination of the following:

- Reducing acute care demand;
- Protecting critical workforce;
- Enhancing the flow of patients and residents through the system; and
- Preventing COVID-19 outbreaks.
Rationale into Action

Using the criteria above, Alberta Health, with input from Alberta Health Services, identified the populations to be included in the province’s phased immunization program. Exact amounts and timelines are subject to change depending on vaccine supply.

Phases

Early Phase 1: December 2020

- Focus on acute care sites with the highest COVID-19 capacity concerns:
  - Healthcare workers in intensive care units
  - Respiratory therapists
  - Staff in LTC and DSL facilities

Phase 1A: January 2021

- Respiratory therapists
- Healthcare workers in intensive care units
- Staff in LTC and DSL facilities
- Home care workers
- Healthcare workers in emergency departments
- All residents of LTC and DSL facilities, regardless of age
- Healthcare workers in COVID-19 units, medical and surgical units and operating rooms
- Paramedics and emergency medical responders

Phase 1B: February 2021 (timeline subject to change depending on vaccine supply)

- Seniors 75 years of age and over, no matter where they live
- First Nations, Métis and persons 65 years of age and over living in a First Nations community or Metis Settlement

Phase 2: April to September 2021

- Work to identify sequencing for Phase 2 groups is underway. Decisions will be made by the Government of Alberta in the coming weeks.

Phase 3: Fall 2021

- Anticipated start of roll-out to the general public

Early Phase 1 and Phase 1A included Albertans at greatest risk for the most severe outcomes from COVID-19, and the healthcare providers who care for them. There is no question that residents of LTC and DSL facilities across the country have borne the brunt of this pandemic with more than 60 per cent of Alberta’s COVID-19 cases reported from within these facilities. We made this group a priority and have completed first-dose COVID-19 immunizations for close
to 50,000 eligible residents and staff at LTC and DSL facilities. This is a huge win in our fight against COVID-19.

**How AHS has Sequenced within Phase 1**

While AHS does not have the ability to add new groups to Phase 1, questions have arisen about who is included in the groups listed above. The COVID-19 Vaccine Sequencing for Healthcare Workers Committee was established by AHS’ Executive Leadership Team to help make these decision.

The sequencing committee has been considering the following questions to support decision making within priority groups including:

- Does the person belong to a group/role prioritized for COVID-19 immunization?
- Do they routinely work in that role or environment?
- Does the immunization of the individual support the rational for group level prioritization?
- Would not including the person in immunization eligibility be contrary to the team-based approach?

We are working quickly to respond to changing circumstances. It is not perfect, but we’re working with good faith and doing our best to make effective decisions with the evidence and information we have.

**Where We Are Now**

As of January 21, 2021, we have just over 33,000 doses in our province. We have nearly 82,000 people who require a second dose in the next few weeks. There are 21,000 people who are eligible as part of Phase 1/1a who still need to receive a first dose.

New vaccine deliveries are pending, and we anticipate additional product in the days and weeks ahead. Pfizer recently announced reductions to its production, and that’s having an impact on supply. Moderna is the second vaccine approved for use in Canada and we are expecting additional shipments over the coming months. There are additional companies working to create vaccine, including Johnson and Johnson and AstraZeneca. Health Canada is reviewing both of these products. If and when they become approved for use in Canada they will provide additional options for vaccine supply and improve access in the future.

Supply over the next few weeks is unpredictable, therefore all first dose appointments for staff and physicians are postponed and many second dose appointments for staff and physicians are being rescheduled.

To be fully immunized against COVID-19, two doses of vaccine are required. Right now, there are more than 80,000 people in Alberta who received a first dose of vaccine and require a second dose, and 21,000 people who are eligible as part of Phase 1/1A who still need to receive a first dose.
Because of the uncertain vaccine supply, we are allocating the vaccine we do have to those who require a second dose within the allowable window, while continuing to offer immunization to LTC and DSL residents.

Anyone whose appointment is being postponed or rescheduled will be contacted directly by AHS via email, text or phone call. Please do not call Health Link. In some instances, this may mean moving an appointment just a few days. Every day is critical to our current vaccine supply to ensure all Albertans, including residents of LTC/DSL, can be immunized according to the recommended timelines.

**Where We Are Heading**

The Government of Alberta is planning for which populations will be part of Phase 2. AHS is in discussion with the government on this, and we anticipate that additional groups of front line healthcare workers will be included in Phase 2. We aren’t able to confirm this currently as those decisions will be made and communicated by Alberta Health in the weeks to come.

We have more than 103,000 direct AHS employees, and 11,800 staff working in AHS’ wholly-owned subsidiaries, Alberta Precision Laboratories, Carewest and CapitalCare Group. AHS is also supported by nearly 15,100 volunteers and more than 10,800 physicians practicing in Alberta, approximately 8,200 of whom are members of the AHS medical staff as well as Covenant Health, which has nearly direct 11,000 employees and 900 employees.

We want to immunize everyone, and we will immunize everyone, but we need the supply to do it. Until then, we will continue to work with what we have.

As details related to vaccine availability and sequencing become available, they will be posted on www.ahs.ca/covidvaccine. We will also communicate directly with staff and physicians as soon as we know more. We know this is difficult. We appreciate all you do to provide care for Albertans, and we promise you that we are doing everything we can to ensure all AHS staff and physicians who provide direct patient care will receive vaccine just as soon as we are able.

**Questions**

If you have a question, please reach out below. Be advised that email volumes are extremely high.

- **Staff:** ahsvaccinetaskforce@ahs.ca
- **Physicians:** cmo@ahs.ca
- **Public** [https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17330.aspx](https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17330.aspx)