Q & A Viral Vector Vaccines

1. Are viral vector vaccines, like AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD approved for use in Canada?

Yes. Health Canada’s decision issued on the 26th of February 2021 authorized the AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD Vaccine for use in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, in accordance with Section 5 of the Interim Order Respecting the Importation, Sale and Advertising of Drugs for Use in Relation to COVID-19.

New Brunswick follows Canada’s National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) : Recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccines for the use of viral vector vaccines.

2. Are viral vector vaccines safe and effective?

Health Canada reviews the available information from searches of the Canada Vigilance database, international databases, and information received from the manufacturers and international regulators.

Like all vaccines authorized for use in Canada, COVID-19 viral vector-based vaccines are held to high safety, effectiveness and quality standards. Only vaccines that meet those standards can be approved and after we approve a vaccine, they are continuously monitored for effectiveness.

The effectiveness of vaccines may vary, but all COVID-19 vaccines protect against severe illness, hospitalization, ICU admission, long-haul COVID and death. The benefit of viral vector vaccination may outweigh the risk of getting the COVID-19 disease or a rare side-effect.

3. What are the potential safety issues with this vaccine?

Public Advisories and Health Product Risk Communications are two ways that Health Canada communicates safety issues. They are published when Health Canada has important updates or other information to share about the product, such as new approvals, information on shortages, or risks.

Any advisories and risk communications that Health Canada has issued about the product are found under the Public Advisories and Risk Communications page. Since the time of authorization, there have been very rare reports of capillary leak syndrome (CLS) and very rare reports in Europe of thrombosis with thrombocytopenia following administration of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine.

Information for consumers on capillary leak syndrome (CLS):

Very rare cases of CLS have been reported following vaccination with AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine. Some affected patients had a previous diagnosis of CLS.

Individuals who have previously experienced episodes of CLS should not be vaccinated with AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine or COVISHIELD and should discuss options for COVID-19 vaccines with their healthcare professional.
CLS is a serious, potentially fatal condition causing fluid leakage from small blood vessels (capillaries) resulting in rapid swelling of the arms and legs, sudden weight gain and feeling faint (due to low blood pressure) leading to organ damage. Individuals should seek medical attention immediately if they develop these symptoms following vaccination.

Information for consumers on thrombosis with thrombocytopenia:

A combination of blood clots with low level of platelets (elements in the blood that help it to clot), in some cases together with bleeding, has been observed very rarely following vaccination with the AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine.

Patients should seek immediate medical attention if they develop shortness of breath, chest pain, leg swelling, or persistent abdominal pain following vaccination with AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine or COVISHIELD. Patients should also seek immediate medical attention if they experience sudden onset of severe or persistent worsening headaches or blurred vision that starts several days after vaccination, or experience skin bruising or pinpoint round spots (other than at the site of vaccination) which starts a few days or more after vaccination.

Canadians are encouraged to get immunized with any of the COVID-19 vaccines that are authorized and available in Canada.

4. Can I get a different vaccine or mix and match my 2nd dose with an mRNA vaccine?

A complete two-dose series is important for protection especially with emerging variants of concern.

New Brunswick is now following the June 1, 2021 recommendations of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) on the interchangeability (mixing) of authorized COVID-19 vaccines in the two-dose vaccine series. For those who received AstraZeneca / COVISHIELD COVID-19 vaccine as first dose regardless if they are under 55 years or 55 years and older, an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine will be offered for the second dose. However, if an mRNA vaccine is contraindicated or if you don’t want an mRNA vaccine, AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD can be offered.

An mRNA COVID-19 product is preferred for your second dose to AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD vaccine due to emerging evidence of a better immune response, and the safety of mixing vaccines.

Mixing and matching vaccines isn't a new concept. Similar vaccines (like influenza, hepatitis A, and others) from different manufacturers are used when vaccine supply or public health programs change.

Even after you have had both doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, continue to follow the recommendations of local public health officials to prevent spread of COVID-19.