

COVID boosters and third doses – Who needs them and why?

The recent announcements about 3rd doses and booster doses have raised a lot of questions, and some frustrations, particularly amongst those who do not yet qualify. Knowing that other countries are taking different approaches to boosters is also causing a lot of confusion. However, by listening to our experts and following the science, our uniquely Canadian approach to vaccinations has paid off. Countries who once criticized our approach, now envying our success. Reviewing our Canadian data shows that the NACI recommendations provide a good balance between keeping us safe at home and limiting demand on the global vaccine supply.

Most of us continue to be well protected against COVID, including Delta, more than 6 months after our second shot. Those of you who started with Astra Zeneca followed by either Pfizer or Moderna, are really doing well. After 5 months, the protection has been almost perfect against any symptomatic illness. The mRNA vaccines are also still going strong, especially if you had your second shot more than 8 weeks after your first. In those under 70 years of age, the mRNA vaccines are still 84 % effective at preventing any symptomatic illness and 96 % effective against severe disease, even with Delta.

We all tend to get a little forgetful as we get older, and as does our immune system. So, by 6 months, protection is starting to drop off slightly in those over 70, providing only 70 % protection for symptomatic illness and 89 % for severe illness. So, these people should probably get a booster after 6 months to prevent any further drop in protection.

If you had 2 doses of AZ, your protection is very strong for the first 4 months, but then starts to fall off more rapidly around 6 months. While it still prevents about 80 % of severe illnesses, protection against mild illness is closer to 50 %. Getting a shot of Pfizer or Moderna after 6 months should give you excellent ongoing protection, while also decreasing community spread.

Certain people have immune systems that cannot respond properly to infections or vaccinations. These people are often poorly protected even after 2 COVID shots. For these people, a 3rd shot given at least 4 but preferably 8 or more weeks after their second shot greatly improves their protection. These shots are not boosters, and these people will likely also need a booster dose at some point. Those who require 3rd doses should be contacted by their physician and provided with documentation which will allow you to get your shot at any walk-in vaccination clinic or pharmacy.

So, most of us can safely wait a little longer for a booster. For those who's protection is declining – people over 70, those under 70 who had 2 doses of AZ and other specific at-risk groups, you will soon be able to book a booster if it has been 6 months since your second dose. Boosting these groups will also reduce community transmission, keeping us all safer. Not boosting those still well protected will free up vaccines globally, help save more lives and end this pandemic sooner.

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