

Choosing not to get vaccinated? Please consider all the consequences.

There are many reasons people choose not to get vaccinated. In Canada, we have the right to make this choice. However, making the best choice means considering all the risks and benefits. If you, as an individual lived in complete isolation, independent from all others, you need only consider your own personal knowledge or beliefs. However, if you choose to be part of a larger community – even for a brief period, your choices will potentially impact other individuals and the entire community.

After being in lockdown for many long weeks, we are hoping to soon venture back out into our communities. Being isolated from friends and family, has reinforced how important our social connections are and how much we value being part of that larger community. A community is more than a group of separate and autonomous individuals whose actions affect only themselves. It is a complex matrix of interwoven lives where individual choices have the power to significantly change other people's lives. Being part of a community requires a balance between the personal rights of each individual and what is right for the greater good of the community and all of those who live there.

Laws help keep the individuals in our community safe from specific and socially defined harms, such as COVID. But, for a community to thrive, we must also weigh the consequences of our personal choices. With COVID, even simple choices may have devastating consequences. All individuals in our community have the right to be protected from COVID. Getting vaccinated is one of the ways we can choose to protect both ourselves and our communities.

We now have extensive evidence that the risks associated with vaccines are much less than those associated with COVID. Refusing the vaccine because you fear these small but possible risks, requires you to make a moral decision between protecting yourself and protecting your community. You must accept your risk of getting COVID and potentially subjecting other people in your community to serious illness, hospitalization and even death. This is a personal dilemma. You must choose what you think is the most right decision for you.

Many people have legitimate concerns and questions about vaccinations. Being part of a community involves open and tolerant discussions about decisions like this. Some may be hesitant to seek information from those unwilling to listen to their concerns. As physicians, we have an ethical duty to provide our patients and community with the most accurate information available, but also to listen empathetically to their concerns. Unfortunately, others may prefer to prey on confusion and anxiety for their own purposes. It is important to consider not just the message, but also the messenger.

In life, we face many choices, all of which have consequences. If based on your knowledge and beliefs, you choose not to be vaccinated, please ensure that you continue to do all you can to keep yourself and your community safe. Remember – we are all in this together.

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