

Ministry of Health

May 14th, 2021

Talking to your Patients About AstraZeneca/COVISHIELD COVID-19 Vaccines Q&As for Health Care Providers

Q: Why is the government choosing to pause first doses of AstraZeneca (AZ)/COVISHIELD (CS) now?

- The decision to pause the rollout and administration of first doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine was done out of an abundance of caution.
- The medical community around the world, including here in Canada/Ontario, are closely monitoring potential side effects associated with all COVID-19 vaccines.
- Recently there has been an observed increase in cases of serious blood clotting events in the presence of low platelet counts in individuals after receiving their first dose of the AZ/CS vaccine in Canada, including in Ontario.
- We will be receiving more shipments of the mRNA (Pfizer/Moderna) vaccines, so we have other vaccine options to offer Canadians.
- Pfizer/Moderna vaccines have not been linked to similar adverse events.
- As with all drugs and treatments, the greater the use, the more we are able to identify extremely rare events. The robust monitoring system in place in Ontario and Canada allowed us to better understand this particular rare event.

Q: Why did the government offer AZ/CS in the first place?

- The AZ/CS vaccine is a very good vaccine that provides significant protection against serious outcomes associated with COVID-19 infections, such as hospitalizations and deaths.
- We maintain that those who received their first dose with the AstraZeneca vaccine did absolutely the right thing to prevent themselves, their families, loved ones and communities.
- In recent weeks, Ontario was experiencing a record number of cases as part of the third wave. It was important that people who were at high risk of suffering serious illness with COVID-19 infection got vaccinated as soon as possible to develop protection against the virus.
- This approach was in keeping with the recommendations of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI).

- The probability of developing a serious outcome – including serious blood clots, hospitalizations, and ICU admissions – from a COVID-19 infection was much higher than the probability developing a serious adverse event after receiving AZ/CS (or any COVID-19) vaccine.
- We are pausing now because the risk of the serious adverse event is now recognized as greater than previously identified. In addition we are now anticipating more shipments of the mRNA (Pfizer/Moderna) vaccines, so we have other options with which to vaccinate Ontarians.

Q: I (or my family member/friend) have already received the AZ/CS vaccine.

What does this mean for me?

- You have done the right thing by getting vaccinated as soon as a vaccine was available to you!
- The AZ/CS vaccine is a very good vaccine that provides significant protection against the serious outcomes associated with COVID-19 infections, such as hospitalizations and deaths.
- If you have received the AZ/CS vaccine within 4-28 days and are experiencing new symptoms, please contact a health care provider for further assessment (see below).

Q: What should I look out for after receiving my AZ/CS vaccine?

- Side effects are possible with all medications or vaccines.
- Contact your health care provider for assessment if you experience new symptoms or feel sick within 4-28 days after receiving your vaccine.
- Go to the emergency department and tell them you have recently received a AZ/CS vaccine if you experience: a severe headache that does not go away; a seizure; difficulty moving part of your body; new blurry vision or double vision that does not go away; difficulty speaking; shortness of breath; severe chest, back, or abdominal pain; unusual bleeding or bruising; new reddish or purplish spots, or blood blisters; or new severe swelling, pain, or colour change of an arm or a leg.

Q: I have already received the first dose of my AZ/CS vaccine. What happens when it is time for me to receive a second dose?

- For the majority of Ontarians who received the first dose of the AstraZeneca team, it is not yet time to receive their second dose.
- Data out of the UK data shows a dramatically reduced risk of serious adverse events in second doses of AstraZeneca, and we are also seeing early promising results of administering a second dose of a different vaccine.
- We know everyone is anxious to know what this means for their second dose and we are committed to providing guidance well in advance of people needing to receive their second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

Q: I heard the likelihood of blood clots via e.g. blood clotting, OCP, pregnancy is higher, so what's the big deal with AZ/CS?

- There are other medical conditions and treatments that are linked to blood clots – including infection with COVID-19 itself. Some blood clotting conditions are very common.
- The type of blood clots seen with AZ/CS are very rare. However, the types of blood clots seen with the AZ/CS vaccine are a very serious type of blood clotting that occurs in a way that is separate/distinct from some of the more common blood clotting conditions. The blood clots seen after the AZ/CS vaccine are serious and can lead to death and disability. This is why we are taking it seriously.
- Even if an event is rare (in the range of 1/55,000 or 1/60,000), in the context of a mass immunization program that aims to immunize millions of Ontarians, these events and their potential need to be carefully considered where there are other vaccines with much greater vaccine supply that do not have this risk and that are now increasingly available.