



Recommendations from CPhA and Neighbourhood Pharmacies

Executive summary

In the coming weeks, governments will be developing their respective vaccine distribution plans to target specific populations, and eventually the roll out of mass immunization campaigns, the likes of which has never been done. Canada's 42,500 pharmacists and 11,000 pharmacies across the country are ready to play their part in delivering COVID vaccines to millions of Canadians, alongside many of our health provider colleagues.

- Pharmacies have the expertise and infrastructure to deliver large scale vaccination campaigns.
- Most Canadians live within 5km of a pharmacy, which means that pharmacists are ideally placed to reach Canadians in rural and remote areas as well as large urban or suburban settings.
- The convenience of pharmacies makes them a top choice for people who wish to get immunized.
- Pharmacists have a proven track record of increasing immunization rates and supporting adherence rates for multi-dose regimens.
- Pharmacies have the digital infrastructure to support patient prioritization and sequencing.
- Pharmacies are served by sophisticated and highly reliable pharmaceutical distribution systems.

Early and clear engagement with health professionals as part of the planning process is essential to ensuring a coordinated approach across the country and to allowing providers the opportunity to prepare accordingly.

Pharmacies at the ready: Key considerations

As Canada embarks on the largest and most complex vaccination campaign in history, it must ensure that there are enough trained immunizers to equitably and easily meet the needs of 37 million Canadians in rural, remote, Indigenous, urban and suburban communities.

Community pharmacy is a key solution for supporting effective, equitable and efficient COVID-19 vaccination at all stages of deployment. Pharmacists are one of the most trusted health care providers and the first and most frequent touchpoint most Canadians have with the health care system.^{1,2} Pharmacists' earliest and most critical role will be to instill confidence and increase adherence rates through repeated engagement with Canadians on vaccine hesitancy.³ Once the highest priority Canadians are immunized and more vaccines with broader stability ranges are approved, pharmacies and pharmacists will have an additional role as integral immunizers to reach herd immunity.⁴

Canada's 42,500 pharmacists and 11,000 pharmacies are a critical access care point for all Canadians, including those in rural and remote communities.⁵ Most Canadians live within 5km of a pharmacy.^{6,7} With a vast geographic footprint across Canada, pharmacies can support the needs of Canadians in rural, remote, Indigenous, urban and suburban settings.

Community pharmacies have the health care expertise and infrastructure to manage large scale seasonal vaccination campaigns. Pharmacists in almost all jurisdictions are authorized to administer a broad range of vaccines and have been essential in delivering Canada's influenza campaigns, particularly managing this year's unprecedented high demand.^{8,9} In Alberta alone, pharmacists provided approximately 80% of all flu shots.¹⁰ When vaccines are available at pharmacies, uptake increases.¹¹

Canadian pharmacies operate at the scale required for this historic task. Based on their experience with influenza vaccination, the average pharmacy can vaccinate 40 patients per pharmacy per day and still maintain their usual dispensing and medication management services.¹² This ability means that with appropriate government support, distribution planning and supply of vaccine, pharmacies could deliver 2.5 to 3 million doses per week.

Pharmacies are already prepared for COVID-19 vaccine distribution and delivery. Currently 89% of Canadian pharmacies routinely administer vaccines, such as the annual influenza vaccine, and 99% of these pharmacies are keen to participate in a COVID-19 immunization campaign.¹³ Pharmacies have already invested in the infrastructure and procedures necessary to administer vaccines safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, including PPE protocols and training, disinfection and cleaning procedures, screening procedures to identify COVID-19 symptoms, appointment booking procedures, and appropriate spacing within pharmacies to ensure safe distancing for patients and staff.¹⁴

Canadians want and expect to get vaccinated at their community pharmacy. The Canadian public recognizes the essential role that pharmacists will play in delivering COVID-19 vaccines. According to a recent national survey conducted by CPhA and Abacus data:¹⁵

- 43% of Canadians chose pharmacy as the top location to receive a COVID-19 vaccination, compared to 42% favouring a physician's office and 14% a public health clinic
- Nearly two-thirds of Canadians say they would get a COVID-19 vaccine at a pharmacy
- 81% of Canadians highly trust their pharmacists and regard the pharmacy as a safe place to get a vaccine

Pharmacies have the digital infrastructure to support patient prioritization guidelines and sequencing. Doses of vaccine will need to be allocated based on priority populations identified by NACI recommendations and established in provincial frameworks. Through their public claims data processes or registries, pharmacists can stratify patients and support the needs of priority groups.¹⁶ Pharmacies can also meet the health equity needs of remote and isolated communities, Indigenous communities, and racialized communities in urban settings where risk of transmission is higher. Pharmacies have also been recognized as being able to proactively identify patients based on their influenza risk factors (e.g., age, chronic conditions, immunocompromised, etc.).¹⁷

Pharmacists can increase immunization and adherence rates for multi-dose vaccines, which will be critical to reaching herd immunity. Pharmacists have established experience in administering multi-dose regimens and have been shown to increase immunization and adherence rates for shingles, HPV and hepatitis vaccines.^{18,19} Many of these vaccines will require anywhere from 1 to 3 doses delivered in a strictly adhered-to regimen. Community pharmacists regularly track, monitor and communicate with patients via the refill interval functions in their pharmacy management systems. Additionally, most pharmacies have invested in appointment booking procedures to remind patients of the need to return for a refill.²⁰ In fact, pharmacies have established experience in administering multiple vaccines opportunistically, which is supported by NACI guidance.²¹

Pharmacies can manage storage and handling requirements. Pharmacists and pharmacies are able to manage complex storage and handling requirements for medications and vaccines, which will be essential in this campaign. All pharmacies are equipped with refrigerators that meet cold chain requirements, and 99% have enough refrigerator (2-8°C) capacity to handle the volume required for a COVID-19 vaccination campaign.²²

Pharmacies are served by a sophisticated and highly reliable pharmaceutical distribution system. Most pharmacies receive daily deliveries, and in urban areas deliveries can occur as often as twice per day. Frequent delivery means that pharmacies hold less inventory and can respond quickly to changes in patient demand. Provinces that have chosen to use the pharmaceutical distribution system for the influenza vaccine experience significant (up to 50%) reductions in waste,²³ a critical consideration in a COVID-19 vaccination program where global demand will outpace supply.

Pharmacies have the infrastructure to collect data that will be critical to the success of a large scale COVID-19 vaccination program. Key information on every patient who receives a vaccine in a pharmacy is captured digitally and is automatically transmitted to provincial drug programs. This information includes the name of the vaccine,

the date, and important patient identifiers such as health card number. Provinces that have a vaccine registry already in place could upload this data automatically rather than creating new data systems. Such information will be essential when evaluating the effectiveness of each vaccine and the success of the COVID-19 campaign.

Recommendations

Early planning will be essential for the successful roll out of the program, so it is critical that pharmacy associations and pharmacy groups be represented in all planning and coordination efforts. To encourage maximum uptake and ensure that pharmacies are prepared and able to assist in meeting Canada's COVID-19 immunization goals, we urge governments to consider and act on the following recommendations:

1. **Provide clear, consistent and frequent public service announcements to all health providers regarding patient prioritization and instructions for receiving a COVID-19 vaccine.** Consistent public health communication across the country regarding patient prioritization is essential to manage patient expectations and to enable providers to develop the necessary systems to stratify people and patients.
2. **Provide clear communications from all levels of government on timing and execution of administration plans.** Given the scale of the campaign ahead, commitment to administering COVID-19 vaccines through community pharmacies as part of their overall distribution plans will be helpful to ensure enough time for planning at the pharmacy level (such as staffing requirements, adjustments to workflow, etc.).
3. **Ensure transparent and committed allocation of inventory to the community pharmacy sector.** Allocation and distribution strategies must include pharmacies at the planning stage and reflect the growing demand from patients who want to access COVID-19 vaccines in their communities and specifically in their community pharmacies. Allocations must also be predictable to ensure that pharmacists can manage continuity of care in multiple-dose regimens without interruption.
4. **Provide the necessary supplies needed for pharmacists to immunize Canadians.** Public stockpiles of supplies (e.g., syringes, alcohol swabs, bandages, etc.) should include allocations to pharmacies. Given the global nature of the pandemic, these critical supplies are in high demand and may be difficult to access by smaller pharmacies.
5. **Vaccinate pharmacists as essential front-line health care workers.** As immunizers, pharmacists and front-line pharmacy staff should be immunized prior to the launch of any broad vaccination campaign in pharmacies.
6. **Ensure a vaccine administration fee that reflects the added time and complexity of administration and education related to this novel vaccine.** Administering this vaccine will require additional work above and beyond influenza campaigns. Time will be needed to instill confidence in the importance of vaccination with patients, particularly the significant number of Canadians with vaccine hesitancy. Patients may need to be triaged for risk and eligibility and need to be notified to return for subsequent doses. Finally, pharmacists will also have a key role in identification and reporting of vaccine-related adverse effects, particularly with no long-term safety data available.
7. **Distribute COVID-19 vaccines through the current pharmaceutical distribution system.** The sophisticated and reliable pharmaceutical distribution system has been shown to be rapid, responsive and efficient in the provinces where it is employed. Wastage is reduced significantly, in some cases by 50%, compared to distribution to pharmacies through public health offices.

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