

Canada clears Johnson & Johnson vaccine

March 5 2021, by Rob Gillies



People wait in line at a COVID-19 vaccine at a clinic at Olympic Stadium marking the beginning of mass vaccination in the Province of Quebec based on age in Montreal, on Monday, March 1, 2021. (Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press via AP)

Canada is getting a fourth vaccine to prevent COVID-19 as the country's health regulator has cleared a Johnson & Johnson shot that works with

just one dose instead of two, two officials familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Friday.

Health experts are eager for a one-and-done option to help speed vaccination. Canada has also approved vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca. The two officials confirmed the approval on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly ahead of the Health Canada announcement.

Like many countries, Canada does not have domestic production and has struggled with an immediate shortage of vaccines.

Canada has pre-purchased 10 million Johnson & Johnson doses, with options to buy another 28 million.

The U.S. approved Johnson and Johnson last month. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said J&J's vaccine offers strong protection against what matters most: serious illness, hospitalizations and death. One dose was 85% protective against the most severe COVID-19 illness in a massive study that spanned three continents—protection that remained strong even in countries such as South Africa, where the variants of most concern are spreading.

J&J also is seeking authorization for emergency use of its vaccine in Europe and from the World Health Organization. The company aims to produce about 1 billion doses globally by the end of the year. Last month, the island nation of Bahrain became the first to clear its use.

The vaccine shortage is so acute in Canada that provincial governments are now saying they will extend the interval between the two doses of Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines to four months rather than three to four weeks so they can quickly inoculate more people.

Canadians 80 and above in the general public are only starting to get vaccinated this month and the National Advisory Committee on Immunization said this week that extending the dose interval to four months would allow as many as 80% of Canadians over the age of 16 to receive a single dose by the end of June simply with the expected supply of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines.

Second doses would begin to be administered in July as more shipments arrive, the panel said.

Canada also faces the prospect of vaccine delivery disruptions from the European Union. A shipment of over a quarter million AstraZeneca vaccines destined for Australia has been blocked from leaving the European Union in the first use of an export control system instituted by the bloc to make sure big pharma companies respect their local contracts.

J&J's shot uses a cold virus like a Trojan horse to carry the spike gene into the body, where cells make harmless copies of the protein to prime the immune system in case the real virus comes along. It's the same technology the company used in making an Ebola vaccine, and is similar to COVID-19 vaccines made by AstraZeneca and China's CanSino Biologics.

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are made with a different technology, a piece of genetic code called messenger RNA that spurs cells to make those harmless spike copies.

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Citation: Canada clears Johnson & Johnson vaccine (2021, March 5) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-03-canada-johnson-vaccine.html>

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