

Canada lags in vaccinations but expects to catch up quickly

March 16 2021, by Rob Gillies



In this March 1, 2021, file photo, Health-care workers walk through the post-vaccine waiting area at a mass COVID-19 vaccination clinic for Peel Region during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mississauga, Ontario. Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns. But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it has had to rely on the global supply chain. (Nathan

Denette/The Canadian Press via AP, File)

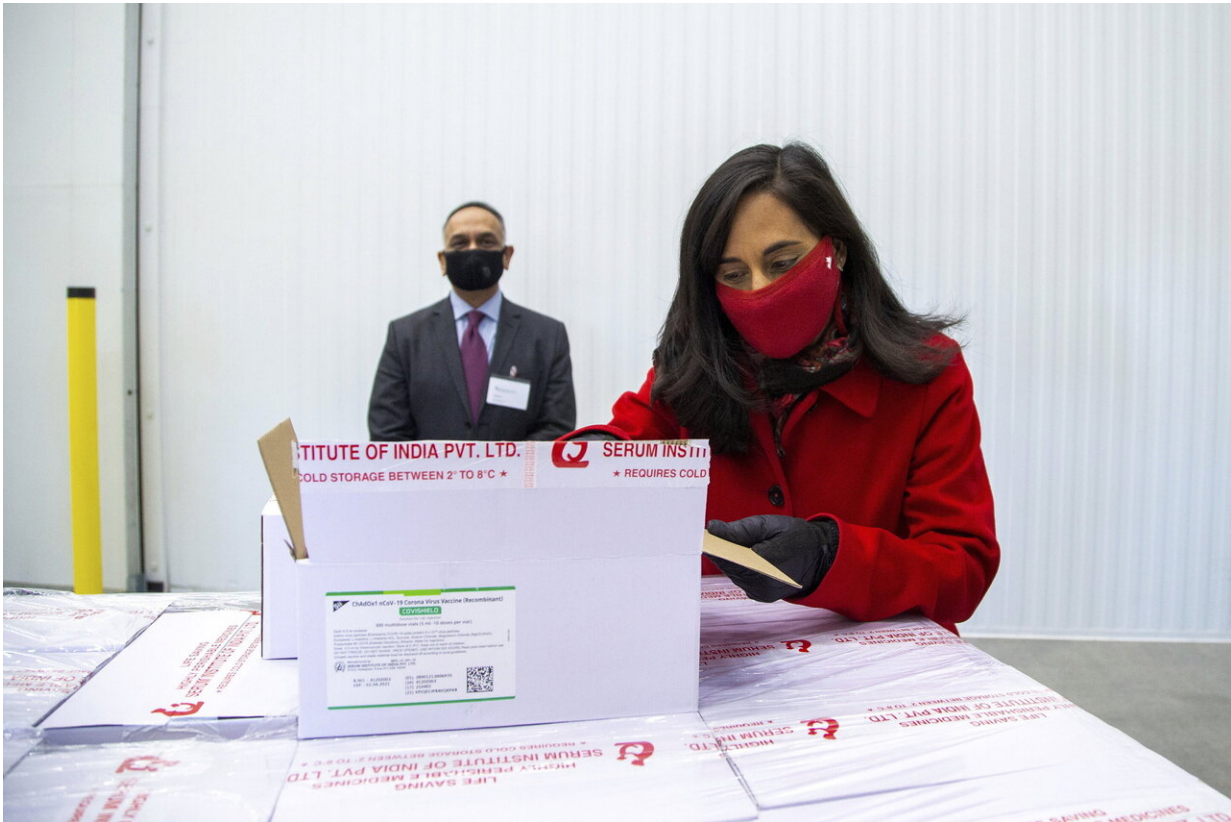
Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns.

But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it lacks the ability to manufacture the vaccine and has had to rely on the global supply chain for the lifesaving shots, like many other countries.

With no domestic supply, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government bet on seven different vaccines manufactured elsewhere and secured advance purchase agreements—enough to get 10 doses for each of Canada's 38 million people. Regulators have approved the Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. While acquiring them has proven difficult, that gamble appears to be about to pay off.

Although Canada's economy is tightly interconnected with the U.S., Washington hasn't allowed the hundreds of millions of vaccine doses made in America to be exported, and Canada has had to turn to Europe and Asia.

"Our best friend and neighbor, the United States, has a Pfizer vaccine plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I can shoot a puck from Kalamazoo and hit Ontario, yet we're not getting our Pfizer vaccine from them," said Dr. Isaac Bogoch, an infectious disease scientist at the University of Toronto.



In this Wednesday, March 3, 2021, file photo, Anita Anand, Canada's Minister of Public Services and Procurement opens a box with some the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine doses that Canada has secured through a deal with the Serum Institute of India in partnership with Verity Pharma at a facility in Milton, Ontario. The trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it lacks the ability to manufacture the vaccine and has had to rely on the global supply chain for the lifesaving shots, like many other countries. "It's not just Canada that is experiencing turbulence. The entire globe is undertaking the largest mass vaccination campaign in its history with completely new supply chains," Anand said. (Carlos Osorio/Pool Photo via AP, File)

The vaccine supply chain difficulties have forced Canada to extend the time between the first shot and the second by up to four months so that everyone can be protected faster with the primary dose. The hope is to

get all adults at least one shot by the end of June.

"It's not just Canada that is experiencing turbulence. The entire globe is undertaking the largest mass vaccination campaign in its history with completely new supply chains," Procurement Minister Anita Anand said in an interview with The Associated Press.

According to the World Health Organization, nearly 80% of the vaccines manufactured so far have been administered in only 10 countries.

Canada ranks about 22nd in the number of doses administered, with about 8% of the population getting at least one shot. That compares with 36% in the U.K, 21% in the U.S. and 8% in the EU. Chile, which like many countries has turned to China, has vaccinated 25% with at least one dose.

The "insatiable global demand" for vaccines has forced the competition against bigger economies like the EU, the U.K. and the U.S., Bogoch said, "and on top of that you are also competing in an environment where there's protectionist laws."



In this March 9, 2021, file photo, Louis Moro, 93, receives the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine from Vena Anderson at a pharmacy prototype clinic in Halifax. Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns. But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it has had to rely on the global supply chain. (Andrew Vaughan/The Canadian Press via AP, File)

Overall, Canada has weathered the pandemic better than most countries in per capita deaths and infections. More than 530,000 Americans and 125,000 U.K. citizens have died, compared with just over 22,000 in Canada. But not having rapid access to vaccines could be costly amid a surge in variant COVID-19 cases. The financial capital of Toronto

largely remains on lockdown.

"There will be a fair amount of envy as Canadians wait and watch Americans with substantially more freedoms," said Dr. Andrew Morris, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Toronto.

Amr Bannis, 69, of Toronto, blamed the government for driving pharmaceutical companies from the country. But he also understands why the U.S. would focus on its own, saying the problem there "is much more serious than ours."

Added Jim Vlahos, 45, also of Toronto: "I don't fault America for looking out for their citizens first, but if they want to open the border, we can't be at such a huge disadvantage with supply."

He said "it would go a long way to mend fences between our countries if America looked to Canada first to assist with supply of vaccines."



In this March 1, 2021, file photo, a woman receives her COVID-19 vaccine at a clinic marking the beginning of mass vaccination in the Province of Quebec based on age in Montreal. Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns. But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it has had to rely on the global supply chain. (Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press via AP, File)

Elizabeth Harris, 83, of Fenelon Falls, Ontario, had been scheduled for a second shot April 7, but she and her husband have been told by the health department it will be another four months.

"We're over 80 and we're among the most vulnerable, but we have to

wait four months," Harris said.

The elderly in long term care homes have received two shots, but the vast majority in the general population haven't.

President Joe Biden said he wanted to ensure that "Americans are taken care of first, but we're then going to try to help the rest of the world." Biden has directed that all U.S. states make all adults eligible for doses by May 1 and expects to have enough supply for every adult American by the end of May.

The White House has said that once U.S. citizens are vaccinated, the next step is ensuring Canada and Mexico are able to manage the pandemic so the borders can reopen. That could mean more vaccines for Canada in June and a shorter wait for second doses.



Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau chats with a woman about to receive a COVID-19 vaccine while touring a vaccination clinic in Montreal on Monday, March 15, 2021. Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns. But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it has had to rely on the global supply chain. (Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press via AP)

"We do expect our diplomatic relationship to allow that to occur," Anand told the AP.

Asked with whom the U.S. will share its vaccines and when, Biden on Tuesday said: "I've been talking with several countries already. We're going to let you know that very shortly."

Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization had recommended the four-month delay between doses after data from the U.K. and Quebec showed a good level of protection offered by the first shot. The U.K. has instituted a similar delay.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization on Tuesday changed its recommendation on the AstraZeneca vaccine and will now allow those over 65 to get it after initially saying there was not enough data to allow for that. Canadian health authorities continue to say AstraZeneca is safe, a day after many European countries suspended use its over reports of dangerous blood clots in some recipients. The company and international regulators say there is no evidence the shot is to blame.

Canada has placed bigger bets on Pfizer and Moderna, ordering up to 76

million doses of Pfizer and up to 44 million of Moderna, compared with up to 20 million of AstraZeneca.



In this March 9, 2021, file photo, pharmacist prepares the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at a pharmacy prototype clinic in Halifax. Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns. But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it has had to rely on the global supply chain. (Andrew Vaughan/The Canadian Press via AP)

In the meantime, deliveries have begun to ramp up in Canada. Based on

a new schedule, it will receive at least 1 million Pfizer doses a week from Europe from March 22 to May 10, Trudeau said Friday.

"That's going to make a big difference," he said.

By the end of March, Canada will have received up to 8 million doses overall, up from 6 million, he said, and it expects to have more than 36.5 million doses by July.

Part of Canada's slow start was because Pfizer's plant in Belgium reduced its shipments in January and February, and halted deliveries entirely for a week at one point as it upgraded the facility to scale up production. That delay took a toll on Trudeau's popularity.

Earlier this month, a shipment of more than a quarter million AstraZeneca doses destined for Australia was blocked from leaving the EU. Anand, the procurement minister, said Canada has been assured by the bloc that Pfizer and Moderna deliveries won't be disrupted.



In this March 14, 2021, file photo, Yvan Courchesne clears snow from the steps of a COVID-19 vaccination site in Montreal as the pandemic continues in Canada and around the world. Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns. But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it has had to rely on the global supply chain. (Graham Hughes/The Canadian Press via AP, File)

She said the "vaccine nationalism" in Europe and the U.S. contributed to the competitive global environment and instability in the supply chain, but noted the "accelerated pace that Canada is going to be traveling now."

"In our initial agreements with our vaccine suppliers, we were very conscious to diversify the supply chains at the time," Anand said.

Canada also has not been getting any supplies from Russia and China, which have used their domestically-produced shots for strategic diplomatic leverage.

Beijing has pledged roughly half a billion doses to more than 45 countries, according to a tally by the AP. None are going to Canada, with relations between the two countries strained after Canada arrested a senior Chinese technology executive on a U.S. extradition request.

Once Canada has fully vaccinated its citizens, Anand said excess supplies will be donated to developing countries.



In this March 10, 2021, file photo, a man waits after receiving his COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination clinic in a hockey arena in Montreal. Canada once was hailed as a success story in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, faring much better than the United States in deaths and infections because of how it approached lockdowns. But the trade-dependent nation has lagged on vaccinating its population because it has had to rely on the global supply chain. (Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press via AP, File)

In the meantime, residents like Bannis said he is OK with the delay of the second dose.

"Tactics to expand coverage but targeting the high-risk population should prove successful," he said.

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