

To all members of Toronto's Jewish community,

March 24, 2021

We've recently crossed the one-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been a difficult year for everyone, and unfortunately some members of our community are no longer with us as a result. As you may already know, we are in the third wave of this virus and 57% of the cases are due to new mutated strains of the virus. These new strains are highly contagious and there is emerging evidence showing they are more deadly. **Every individual in our community has a moral, social and religious obligation to act in order to limit the spread of the virus.**

What about Passover celebrations?

Passover holidays are normally a time for families and friends to get together and celebrate. Unfortunately, it is imperative that our community NOT GATHER. To keep our community safe and healthy, we must practice *Pikuach Nefesh* and make the necessary sacrifices to protect ourselves and our loved ones.

Though you may be tempted to make an exception and bend this rule by inviting your close ones, we urge you to remember that each additional person increases the risk to yourself, your family, and every member of this community. You have the power to protect your loved ones from becoming sick or even dying.

Having received one dose of the vaccine does not mean you are fully immunized. Antibodies start offering partial immunity only 2 weeks after inoculation. Passover falls before the time of antibody peak for most people recently vaccinated. You can therefore still become ill if you catch COVID-19. DO NOT GATHER even if you recently received your first immunization.

All pandemics eventually come to an end. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. With the vaccination rollout we will soon be able to celebrate future holidays and simchat together. We must persevere together through these difficult times!

Chag Pesach Sameach,

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On behalf of the medical professionals below:

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FAQ:

1 - My family member received the first dose of vaccine, are they safe to spend Pesach with us?

NO, DO NOT GATHER. Although your family member has now been immunized, it takes at least 2 weeks for their body to gain partial protection. For your loved one to be considered fully immune, they will need two doses of the vaccine.

2 - If I have received the vaccine, can I still get COVID-19? If so, am I still contagious?

Yes, even with the vaccine, you can get COVID-19. However, you might show no to little symptoms of the disease. With one dose of the vaccine, you could still be contagious and spread it to others. Research is still underway about the infection rate after the second dose. Although preliminary data shows it drops significantly, results are still trickling in. Stay tuned...

3 - Will I be able to choose which brand of COVID-19 vaccine that I want to receive? Can I pick the best, most effective vaccine?

All vaccines currently offered in Canada are 100% effective at preventing severe illness from COVID-19, ICU admissions and death. The difference in effectiveness are regarding mild symptoms versus no symptoms. Delaying a vaccine may be dangerous. The new strain of COVID-19 is highly contagious and more deadly. Delaying a vaccine by choice puts you at significantly higher risk. The longer you wait, the longer you remain unprotected and prolong the risk of getting COVID19. In addition to that, you will not be allowed to choose which vaccine to receive when your turn comes.

4 - Should women who are pregnant, trying to conceive or breastfeeding get the vaccine?

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada (SOGC), the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) and several other national and international organizations in Canada, the USA, Europe and Israel have advised that all pregnant and breastfeeding women be offered vaccination at any time during their pregnancy if no contraindications exist. Pregnant women are at significantly higher risk for adverse outcomes. These include risk of severe illness, hospitalizations and death, and preterm labour. They are currently deemed to be high priority to get the vaccine. If you are breastfeeding, kol hakavod! You will be passing on antibodies to your baby! There is also no contraindication to the vaccine if you are trying to conceive.

5 - The AstraZeneca vaccine is "less effective" compared to Pfizer or Moderna. What exactly does this mean? From clinical trial data, all three vaccines currently offered in Canada confirm 100% protection against severe disease. Zero vaccinated people in any of the trials were hospitalized or died of COVID-19 after the vaccines had fully taken effect.

The efficacy numbers are protection from having one or more symptom of COVID-19, as mild as they may be.

6 - I am young and healthy. I know I won't die from COVID-19. Why should I care?

Although most young and healthy people have shown to have only mild symptoms, some have gone to have severe illness, needing hospitalization, and death. Although the numbers may be small proportionately, the absolute number is still considerably large.

In addition, many healthy people go on to become "long haulers" where they develop chronic, oftentimes debilitating symptoms that last weeks to months after their infection. This is little understood by the medical community and there is currently no treatment for these incapacitating symptoms.