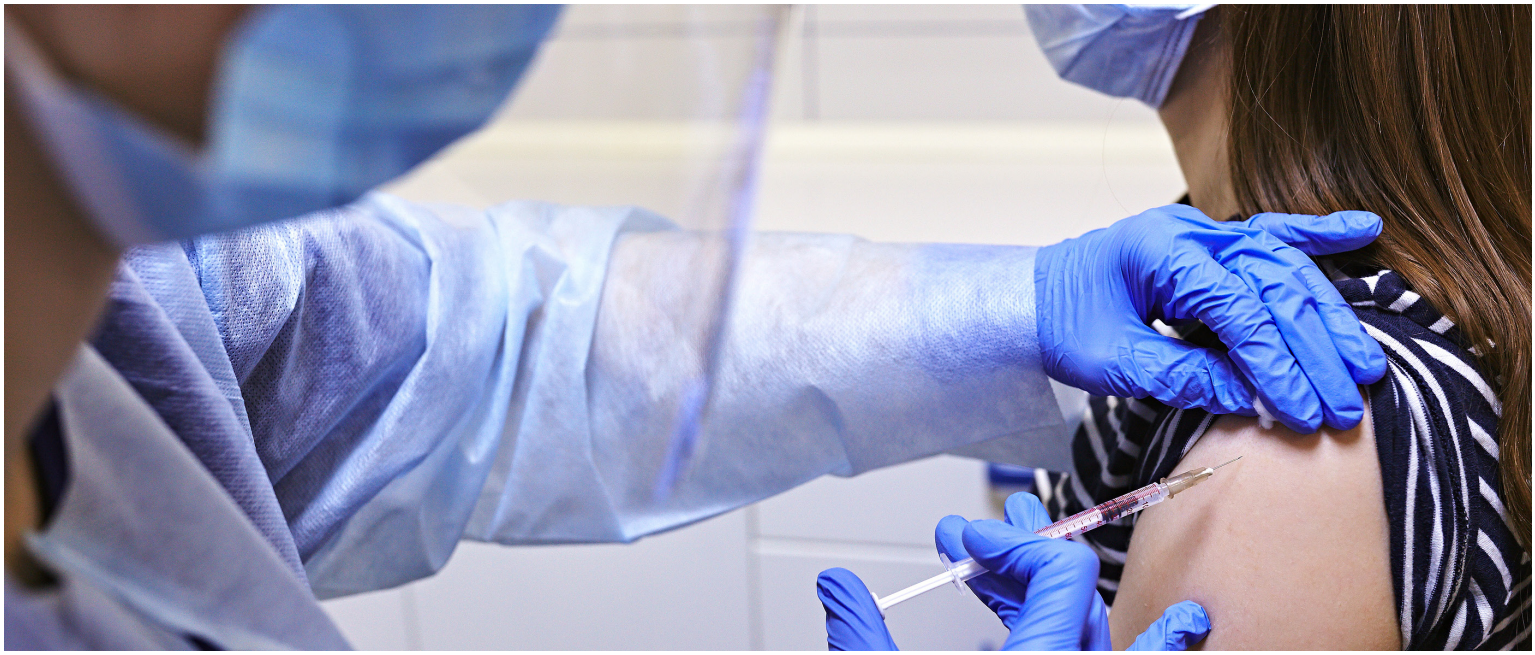

Addressing Vaccine Hesitancy on the Front Lines:

Information about COVID-19 Vaccines for Social Service Providers Working with People Experiencing Homelessness in the West Kootenay Region

In March 2021, the Nelson Committee on Homelessness and Selkirk College offered a 1-hour virtual session on COVID-19 vaccines, led by Nurse Practitioner, James Kitch, and Selkirk College Nursing Instructor, Rob Tanner. The session was targeted at social service providers, and had the objectives of 1) providing basic information on vaccine theory and the COVID-19 vaccines that were available at the time; and 2) sharing tips on how to communicate with service users about COVID-19 vaccines. The overall goal of the session was to combat misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines by providing a common knowledge base for front-line social service staff. A full recording of the session is available here. This document provides a brief summary of topics discussed during the session.

HOW COVID-19 VACCINES WORK

Vaccination is one of the most successful health interventions in history. Vaccines work in two main ways. First, vaccines function on a personal level by introducing a very small amount of protein from a virus. This protein primes an individual's immune system to be able to better identify and fight a virus if it enters the body. At the time of writing this, there are four COVID-19 vaccines approved for use by Health Canada, including two mRNA-based vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna) and two adenovirus-based vaccines (AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson).

The second way vaccines limit the spread of disease occurs on a societal level. As the number of people with immunity to a virus increases, the number of susceptible individuals decreases which minimizes the potential for the virus to spread. Another common term used to describe this principal is herd immunity. With reference to COVID-19 the percentage of immune population that is necessary to reach herd immunity is speculated to be approximately 85% of people; however, this value is variable depending on the virulence of particular strains. Vaccination acts as the most effective and viable way to rapidly reach these levels of immunity and to prevent new variants from emerging.

VACCINE EFFECTIVENESS

When viewing the effectiveness of the available vaccines it is important to note how the vaccine trials were designed. In the trials for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, the focus was on the reduction of moderate to severe symptomatic infections. This outcome was met approximately 95% of the time in individuals aged 16-64.

The focus for the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson trials was reduction of asymptomatic and symptomatic COVID infections which occurred at lower percentages than the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Due to data not being collected on asymptomatic

infections in the Pfizer and Moderna trials, efficacy rates cannot be directly compared between available vaccines. Despite this difference it is accepted that all available vaccines reduce the spread of moderate and severe cases by 85-95%. Even with the high efficacy rates of these vaccines a small percentage of vaccinated individuals remain susceptible to infection. Further, vaccinated individuals can continue to act as hosts spreading the virus which is why it is essential that guidelines and precautions must still be followed after vaccination so that vaccinated individuals do not act as vectors for the disease.

Though the long-term effectiveness of these vaccines is not currently known given uncertainty in how the disease will evolve, it is possible that vaccinated individuals will need booster shots to maintain immunity over time.

WHO SHOULD GET VACCINATED?

The short answer to this question is everyone who can. The route to herd immunity will be shorter if more people become vaccinated. The government has developed a rigorous vaccination rollout plan taking many factors into account in order to protect the most vulnerable people in the population. However, to continue protecting these people and provide the best outcome for all of society, vaccinations must be administered to the remainder of the population. This includes pregnant women, previously infected individuals, immunocompromised people, and possibly children as more information is acquired.

VACCINE SAFETY

All vaccines have undergone very thorough testing to be approved. A common misconception is that vaccine development and trials were rushed however this is not the case. What took place was the rapid development of vaccines funded by enormous amounts of money backing the research and large scale collaboration within the scientific community using the most advanced resources available.

The COVID-19 vaccines have been held to the same standard as previous vaccines and function using similar principles. Trials included thousands of participants and millions of people around the world have now been vaccinated. Very few adverse effects have been reported. With regard to the novel mRNA vaccines, long term adverse effects are scientifically unlikely as the components of the vaccine begin to degrade soon after injection. Short term effects do occur from the vaccination which includes fatigue and soreness at the site of injection. These effects are minor relative to the potential consequences of being infected. Allergic reactions to vaccines are rare, occuring in less than 10 people per million vaccinated.

COMMUNICATING WITH SERVICE USERS ABOUT COVID-19 VACCINES

The Nelson CARES Society gathered information on how service providers can effectively communicate about vaccines with service users who may be hesitant to become vaccinated. This effort concluded that foremost, the goal of vaccination-related conversations should be to help individuals make their own informed decisions and opinions regarding vaccination.

Some individuals will be uncertain about vaccination or simply unaware of the facts. Discussions with this group will be most effective if the service provider takes an honest, compassionate, and relatable approach that doesn't attempt to convince anyone to be vaccinated, but rather focuses on personal experience ("I'm not an expert but I can tell you what I know…") and points to established facts. It is important to be empathetic and recognize that a service user may have had negative past experiences with the health care system.

The use of self disclosure ("This is what I'm doing and why…") may be helpful as decision making can be an emotional process and service providers are often seen as a trusted and dependable source of information. Another recommended approach focuses on the community aspect of vaccination. Emphasizing benefits such as herd immunity can help people understand how getting vaccinated can protect the people around them while helping the pandemic end sooner.

One or more of these strategies can be used to limit the spread of misinformation and support vaccine-hesitant individuals to make an informed choice.

LEARN MORE

ImmunizeBC's website is a trusted resource for information on COVID-19 vaccines: https://immunizebc.ca/covid-19