

Q. I have had my second COVID-19 vaccine and was told I still need to wear my mask in public spaces, even if I show proof of being fully vaccinated. Why is that? If getting the second dose doesn't give my freedom back, why bother getting the second dose?

A. We are beginning to see more people lining up to receive their second "shot" which we all hope is one more step towards our return to normal. Beginning Monday May 31<sup>st</sup>, due to an increase in vaccine supply, Ontario will be opening up their booking system to allow those 80 years and older to schedule a second dose appointment at an earlier date than they were originally assigned. It is hoped that by mid-June, this will open up to anyone 70 and older to do the same. That is great news! Before getting to answer the question, it might be wise to recall the Do's and Don'ts after receiving your first dose. Though we are partially immunized after our first dose of the 2-dose vaccines, it is suggested that we behave as though we have not been vaccinated at all. In other words, you should continue to wear your mask, avoid crowds, and practice physical distancing like we have been for over a year now. That has been a relatively easy task for a while with the province in a lock-down such that we could not do much more than walk, cook, stream shows/movies, watch sports playoffs and watch our garden grow (and our hair too!). It's wonderful that we can now add golf and tennis to this list. But as the world opens up again, there will be a temptation to go back to our old ways too

quickly. The reasons for continuing to be patient before returning to social activities after one dose are;

- You are not fully immunized and therefore you continue to be at risk of acquiring the coronavirus.
- Though your risk of getting seriously ill with the virus is low after one dose, there are reports of Long Covid after even a mild case of COVID-19.
- You are still able to transmit the virus to others around you that may not be fully or even partially vaccinated.
- The first dose is only 33% effective against B.1.617.2 (Indian variant) and 50% effective against B.1.1.7 (UK or Kent variant).

Two weeks after the second dose of the vaccine the efficacy rates increase against the variants

- Pfizer is looking to be 88% effective against B.1.617.2 and 93% against B.1.1.7
- AstraZeneca is showing 60% effectiveness against B.1.617.2 and 66% against B.1.1.7

Getting back to the question, while you may be fortunate to have received 2 doses of the vaccine already, the majority of people have not, at least not in our small rural town. There are still many that have not even been able to receive their first dose yet which means they are very susceptible to the virus. While being vaccinated greatly reduces your chances of transmitting the virus to someone else, we are not certain this is fool proof. If those all around you are vaccinated, experts agree masks will be able to come off. But the reality is that in public settings, there will be still plenty of people in your vicinity

who will not have been fully vaccinated just yet and are therefore still at risk. At present, though the number of new daily cases in Grey Bruce has dwindled, the percentage of active cases that are due to the VOC (Variants of Concern) is 75%. We need to continue to do our part, as we have for a long time now, until the number of vaccinated individuals increases and we attempt to attain herd immunity. Recall that the more people that are vaccinated, the less chance the virus has to mutate and create more variants.

It is true that two weeks after your second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, you are considered to be fully vaccinated. So many of us are experiencing pandemic fatigue and are awaiting the day we can go back to living our pre-pandemic life. To add to that, we watch the news/sports with envy as we see our neighbours to the South attending functions and Britons beginning to return to a new normal and congregating once again. Canada has lagged behind these countries with the vaccine rollout and thus have been slower to get vaccines into people's arms. Here are a few things to consider before we begin to unmask.

1. According to Theresa Tam, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, for Canada to "open up" safely we need 75% of Canadians to have received the first dose and we need 20% of them to be doubly vaccinated. We have a long way to go to achieve this; In early May, the statistics show that 40% of the population has had a first dose and only 3% fully vaccinated.

2. There are statistics that show, not surprisingly, that people that take immunosuppressants (medications that reduce your immune system), are having a reduced response to the COVID-19 vaccine. This means that they are not as protected as most others against the virus. Since they are on immunosuppressants, they will not be equipped to fight the virus as well as the rest of us. When you are out and about running your essential errands (hopefully non-essential errands before too long), you just never know who might come into close contact with, it just might be an immunocompromised individual.
3. Another reason to continue to don your mask despite being fully vaccinated is the fact that mask wearing has proved to be beneficial at reducing the spread of other ailments that normally inflict us each winter. Recall from a prior column that discussed the nearly non-existent cold and flu season this year. Perhaps we need to consider wearing masks beyond the pandemic to continue this trend in future years.
4. Lastly, Ontario has mandated mask wearing in public spaces. Nowhere in the regulation does it suggest that those persons that are fully vaccinated are exempt from this rule. Since this regulation is enforced for all Ontarians, it does not allow for individual businesses to make their own rules to abide by. Perhaps that may change as more people get vaccinated, only time will tell. The stores that are fortunate enough to remain open during these unprecedented times and the businesses that will reopen

once they are allowed certainly do not need the added stress of trying to decipher whether or not each person entering their premises had indeed been fully vaccinated or not. For the safety of the greater community, please be patient and continue to do your part and wear your mask. For more information on this or any other topic, contact the pharmacists at Gordon Pharmasave, Your Health and Wellness Destination.