



NEWS

Hundreds of thousands of doses of COVID-19 vaccine to arrive in Canada next week

By [Tonda MacCharles](#) Ottawa Bureau

Monday, December 7, 2020

OTTAWA—A quarter million doses of a new COVID-19 vaccine produced by Pfizer/BioNTech will begin to arrive in Canada next week, in preparation for a national vaccination campaign that will kick off as soon as Health Canada regulators give it the green light.

“Vaccines are coming,” said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Flanked by Maj.-Gen. Dany Fortin, the military commander he named to oversee

vaccine delivery, and his procurement minister Anita Anand, Trudeau told reporters the first shipment is expected imminently in anticipation that Health Canada will give that authorization this week.

The early delivery of doses will arrive in batches, but overall the initial amount expected — 249,000 doses — by the end of December is enough to begin the two-stage inoculations of nearly 124,500 people. It is a two-dose vaccine, with each shot spaced three weeks apart.

Under fire by Opposition critics — who continued to call for a clear date when all Canadians would be vaccinated — and facing media questions about whether the early delivery was a result of political pressure, Trudeau said his government has resisted calls to specify dates until there was a firm timeline in sight, saying it did not want to “get people’s hopes up.”

“We are facing the largest immunization in the history of Canada,” Trudeau said. “This is no small task, which is why we have a clear plan.”

But it did not satisfy Conservative Leader Erin O’Toole who in a written statement said, “Canadians still don’t have critical information needed to know when lockdowns might end,” including the date when “every Canadian have access to a vaccine.”

He demanded to know details such as how many people each month will be inoculated, how safe storage and distribution requirements will be met, and how vaccines will be delivered to Indigenous communities, members of the Canadian Armed Forces and veterans — all of whom fall under federal jurisdiction.

The NDP said the small initial batches are not nearly enough to cover priority groups.

But now that the reality of a vaccine campaign is at hand, Trudeau’s government is providing more clarity to premiers and to Canadians, saying vaccines will be distributed on a per capita basis to all provinces, and it will be free of charge, with Ottawa footing the bill.

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That's unlike influenza vaccines, which are cost-shared by the federal and provincial governments.

"Every Canadian who wants access to a vaccine is going to have access to a vaccine. That vaccine is provided free of charge from the federal government," said Anand.

Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe said he expects the decision to authorize the Pfizer vaccine "in the next day or two," and voiced deep relief.

"This is good news for us in this province...this is the finish line on when we can start to think about ultimately going back to life as we used to know it."

Moe said the decision to divvy up vaccine supplies based on provincial population is "the easiest, quickest and likely the fairest way to distribute these vaccines across the nation in very quick order."

It will be up to the provinces to deliver vaccines to the priority groups identified by the National Advisory Committee on immunization, said Trudeau. That list starts with long-term-care-home residents and staff, and people over 80; followed by health-care and personal-support workers with direct patient contact and by Indigenous communities in remote or isolated areas where COVID-19 has a disproportionately heavy impact.

But it is already clear the logistics of transporting Pfizer's sensitive vaccine may pose big challenges, with Ontario and Quebec signalling Monday it may not be possible to deliver vaccines directly into long-term-care homes immediately.

Rather, Ontario's head of delivery operations, retired general Rick Hillier, suggested the province may need to first administer vaccine to people who can come to a central distribution point. He said Ontario expects it could receive about 85,000 of the first quarter million doses.

Quebec's strategic medical adviser Dr. Richard Massé said that province is looking to establish mobile clinics to reach smaller long term care homes by the end of January.

Previously Trudeau and his ministers had insisted vaccine delivery would only begin in the first three months of 2021, with up to 6 million doses (4 million from Pfizer and 2 million from Moderna) arriving in staggered fashion. Those two companies are the only ones well along in the regulatory approval process.

The news was announced on a day when Fortin was overseeing a national “dry run” or mock exercise involving provinces receiving virtual shipments of Pfizer’s “ultracold” vaccine – a frozen product that has sensitive shipping, storage and delivery requirements in containers ensuring a stable minus 80C environment.

Fortin said that boxes were already in the air on planes departing from Pfizer’s Belgium manufacturing site en route to Canada.

Once they arrive, Pfizer will deliver them to 14 distribution sites identified by provinces where there is “ultracold” freezer storage capacity – many in hospitals and research centres. It is a rehearsal of sorts for next week’s real delivery. Fortin said provinces are “on track” to be ready, but that readiness will be assessed this week.

Territorial leaders in the north have indicated that, given the complex logistics required for safekeeping the Pfizer’s “ultracold” vaccine, they want to await the authorization of other vaccines with less stringent freezer storage requirements, Fortin said.

If anything goes wrong during the delivery, Trudeau said, the contracts have been negotiated to anticipate liability questions, but he did not say who would bear that responsibility, saying only, “Canada has undertaken the necessary measures to ensure everyone is protected through that.”

Moderna, the second company in line for authorization by Health Canada, requires only minus 20C storage, and is stable at regular refrigerator temperatures of two to eight degrees for up to 30 days. Once it is approved, Fed Ex Express planes will help move that vaccine from the manufacturer to provinces, and Innomar Strategies will aid provinces with distribution.

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