

Preparing for a Dementia-Friendly COVID-19 Vaccination Experience

Dementia affects how people express themselves, understand what is being communicated to them, how they understand and navigate their environment, and what additional supports they may require. Common changes experienced can include difficulty understanding the words heard, difficulty following instructions with many steps, disorientation in physical space, and sensory overload.

Roughly 7% of Canadians aged 65 and over live with some form of dementia. This population will make up a sizeable minority of Ontarians being vaccinated throughout phase two; it is imperative that vaccination centres be designed with the needs of people living with dementia in mind.

This document is intended as a checklist of considerations for Public Health Units, pharmacies, and primary care settings when designing and operating COVID-19 vaccination sites.

General Considerations

1. Reach out to Community Support Service organizations for their assistance with online booking, particularly Community Care, so that they can arrange a vaccination appointment with transportation when required.
2. Consider vaccinating the care partner at the same time as the person living with dementia, even if one or the other is not yet eligible for vaccination (for example, a 68 year old care partner supporting someone aged 70 who lives with dementia). Otherwise, the care partner will be required to bring the person living with dementia along with them to their own appointment or be required to arrange respite care, which can be difficult and costly.
3. Set up space for both the person living with dementia and their care partner to sit together for vaccine administration and observation. Recognize that the care partner will need to accompany the person living with dementia at all stages of the vaccination process.
4. Consider establishing a daily block of time where people living with dementia will be prioritized in the event a queue forms. This block of time should be in the late morning (such as 10 a.m.-noon), when people living with dementia are often least tired, hungry, and otherwise distracted. At all other times adequate seating should be available throughout the vaccination centre; seniors in general, and especially those living with dementia, should not be required to physically stand in line to maintain their appointment slot.
5. Consider what steps will be required to obtain consent, especially for those people accompanied by a care partner serving as the substitute decision maker or power of attorney for personal care.

Communication

1. Slow down your speech.
2. Use short and clear sentences by breaking down the conversation into smaller pieces of information.
3. A person living with dementia may be unaware you are speaking to them when you are wearing a face covering. Make eye contact, and use the person's name. If appropriate, use gentle touch on the person's hand or shoulder.
4. Give extra time for a response. The person living with dementia may need extra time to answer questions. Be patient and try not to jump in too quickly.
5. Repeat the question or sentence if needed. Try not to re-word the question. Instead, repeat sentences, word for word, to help the person process your question.
6. Be aware of your tone of voice. Make a conscious effort to understand that the person may be struggling to comprehend what is being asked of them, and needs a little more of your time.

Physical Environment

1. Use signage/wayfinding instruction that is clear and simple to read in large print placed at eye level with the use of graphics or images where possible. Please note that the colours black and white are difficult for the brain to process; consider other contrasting colour combinations.
2. Clearly mark accessible washrooms, noting that the care partner may need to accompany the person living with dementia to the washroom.
3. Ensure adequate lighting throughout the environment.
4. Provide wide and unobstructed aisles/pathways.
5. Consider providing the person living with dementia a separate or less "busy" space to for the post-injection observation period to reduce distractions and to provide space for those who need to move or pace.

For further information:

Contact your local Alzheimer Society: <https://alzheimer.ca/on/en/about-us/find-your-local-alzheimer-society>

-OR-

Contact the Alzheimer Society of Ontario: staff@alzon.ca / 1-800-879-4226