



BC-CfE Committee for Drug Evaluation and Therapy supports use of COVID-19 vaccines for people living with HIV

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) Committee for Drug Evaluation and Therapy (CDET) recently completed its evaluation of all of the available data regarding the use of Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 mRNA vaccines for persons living with HIV (PLWH).

Based on the committee's expert opinion, the BC-CfE supports the use of Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 mRNA vaccines to protect PLWH aged 18 years or older against COVID-19 related disease, if they meet current public health criteria for priority groups and if they have no contraindications to the product.

Health Canada said the two COVID-19 vaccines it has so far approved are safe, effective and will save lives. In explaining the efficacy of the vaccines, Health Canada said, "Vaccines do more than protect the people getting vaccinated, they also protect everyone around them. The more people in a community who are vaccinated and protected from COVID-19, the harder it is for the virus to spread."

Both Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are the mRNA type. This kind of vaccine, according to Health Canada, "teach our cells how to make a protein that will trigger an immune response without using the live virus that causes COVID-19. Once triggered, our body then makes antibodies. These antibodies help us fight the infection if the real virus does enter our body in the future."

Although data for use of the mRNA vaccines in PLWH is limited, CDET expects similar vaccine responses to those without HIV. These mRNA vaccines are not known to be associated with more serious adverse events amongst immunocompromised individuals,

however, it should be noted immune response may potentially be sub-optimal in those that are immunocompromised. PLWH on antiretroviral therapy with an undetectable HIV plasma viral load and CD4 count above 200 cells per cubic millimeter of blood (cells/mm³) are likely to have an intact immune response.

CD4 cells are a type of white blood cell which play a key role in the immune system and when a person is living with HIV the virus attacks the CD4 cells in their blood. A healthy immune system normally has a CD4 count ranging from 500 to 1,600 cells/mm³.

The efficacy and safety of Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 mRNA vaccines is less clear amongst individuals with a detectable HIV plasma viral load or CD4 count below 200 cells/mm³. This is because PLWH who met these criteria were not included in these vaccine studies. CDET says these individuals may be offered the vaccine after risk/benefit counselling under the guidance of experienced health practitioners.

B.C.'s vaccination strategy has been developed based on recommendations from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI). The strategy is focused on protecting those most vulnerable to severe illness first.

The first groups to get vaccinated between December and February include: residents, staff, and essential visitors to long-term care and assisted-living residences; those in hospital or community awaiting a long-term care placement; health care workers providing care for COVID-19 patients; and remote and isolated Indigenous communities.

Starting next month until March, the immunization program will expand to include many groups the BC-CfE serves. These include: seniors, age 80 and above; Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) seniors, age 65 and above; people experiencing homelessness and/or using shelters; provincial correctional facilities; adults in group homes or mental health residential care; long term home support recipients and staff; hospital staff, community GPs and medical specialists; and other Indigenous communities not vaccinated in first priority group.

BC's Ministry of Health said everyone in the province who is recommended to get the shot will have the opportunity to do so by the end of this year. Until then, health officials are reminding everyone how we all need to continue to protect each other by following public health orders and washing our hands, staying home when sick, maintaining physical distance, and wearing a mask in public indoor spaces.

BC's Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry says achieving herd immunity will become more of a government priority during the spring. This will be when more doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are available and two more COVID-19 vaccines are approved by Health Canada.

As the government of BC says, "Herd immunity could be reached once 60 to 70% of the population is vaccinated. When people in British Columbia decide to get the COVID-19 vaccine, they are not only protecting themselves from the virus, they are also protecting everyone around them. If a majority of British Columbians get the COVID-19 vaccine, this would reduce transmission rapidly."

» "Many people living with HIV fall into priority groups for COVID vaccination such as health care providers or long-term care workers or residents. It is critical people living with HIV be immunized against COVID as per public health guidelines."

— Head of the SPH Division of Infectious Disease, Dr. Val Montessori



BC-CfE's COAST Study hosts Café Scientifique event on climate change and mental health

Climate Impacts
on the Mental Health and Wellness
of British Columbians

Monday February 1st 2021
4.00pm - 6.00pm PST

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» The BC-CfE COAST team invites you to an exciting virtual Café Scientifique titled "Climate Impacts on the Mental Health and Wellness of British Columbians" on February 1st, 2021. This event represents a collaboration between the BC-CfE, the University of Victoria, Simon Fraser University and the Pacific Climate Impacts Consortium, and has been generously funded by the Pacific Institute of Climate Solutions.

The event, to be held over Zoom due to pandemic restrictions, hopes to raise awareness and facilitate community engagement on the topic of climate change and mental health and specifically discuss the pathways by which mental health and wellness and climate change influence each other. Through presentations and an interactive Q&A, we will hear from two well respected academics in the field of climate change and mental health, Dr. Ashlee Cunsolo and Dr. Maya Gislason.

Dr. Cunsolo is the founding dean of the School of Arctic and Subarctic Studies at the Labrador Institute of Memorial University, a former Canada Research Chair (Tier II) and a member of the Royal Society of Canada of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists. She is a leading voice nationally and internationally on climate change, mental health and ecological grief and has written

numerous articles as well as contributed regularly to the media on these topics. She is a lead author on the Health Canada Climate Change Assessment reports.

Dr. Gislason is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University and a Michael Smith Foundation Health Research Scholar. She is a longstanding champion of ecosystem approaches to health, and as a climate change and health equity scholar she focuses primarily on addressing the impacts of climate change and intensive resource extraction on rural, remote, northern and Indigenous communities in Canada. Through her work, she strives to strengthen Planetary Health and advance intergenerational climate justice and believes interventions should be defined by co-benefits to both people and the planet.

This event will begin with an Indigenous Ceremonial Opening by Elder Valerie Nicholson, a peer Indigenous Research Associate at the BC-CfE and will be moderated by the passionate youth climate activist, Abhay Sachal, co-founder and director at Break the Divide Foundation.

We invite you to share this event with your networks! Please register to join us from 4-6pm PST on Monday February 1st, 2021.

To register for the event visit: http://bit.ly/bccfe_cs.

RECOGNITION

BC-CfE supporter Terry Salman receives Order of Canada

» Terry Salman, a friend and long-time supporter of the BC-CfE, was recently named a member of the Order of Canada.

Created in 1967, the Order of Canada ranks among our country's highest honours and is presented by the governor general. Salman was appointed for his contributions to mining exploration, and for his prodigious philanthropy and community activism.

Among his many community service activities, Salman spent eight years as chairman of St. Paul's Hospital Foundation and is currently a member of the St. Paul's Foundation Campaign Executive Committee.

As Chairman of the St Paul's Hospital Foundation, Salman became a strong supporter of the work being done by the BC-CfE during a time of intense stigma surrounding people living with HIV/AIDS and the populations most affected by HIV/AIDS. Salman's public support of the BC-CfE during the height of BC's HIV/AIDS crisis is a testament to his vision, leadership and courage.

Salman was instrumental in the establishment of the first AIDS Research Endowment, a collaborative effort between St Paul's Hospital and the University of British Columbia. This endowment played a pivotal role in the BC-CfE's eventual development of highly active



Terry Salman

antiretroviral therapy (HAART), which revolutionized the treatment of HIV worldwide, enabling the suppression of viral loads to undetectable levels and providing a vastly improved quality of life and lifespan.

Salman's support was also instrumental in the BC-CfE's introduction of the concept of **Treatment as Prevention**® and the eventual United Nations endorsement of the BC-CfE's proposed 90-90-90 Target.

Further to this, Salman championed the implementation of the BC-CfE program that became known as "Seek and Treat to Optimally Prevent HIV & AIDS in BC"® (STOP HIV/AIDS®). Thanks to a meeting that he helped secure with BC's then-premier Gordon Campbell, BC-CfE's leadership was able to convince the provincial government that HAART could not only prevent progression of HIV infection to AIDS, and premature death, but HAART could also virtually stop HIV transmission and bring huge cost savings.

The success of the STOP HIV/AIDS® program and the work of the BC-CfE has had a remarkable impact as the province, which once had Canada's highest rates of HIV cases, has seen a 90% decrease in new AIDS cases, a 74% decrease in AIDS-related deaths and a 73% decrease in new HIV diagnoses. The BC-CfE congratulates Terry Salman on his well-deserved appointment to the Order of Canada.

The BC-CfE congratulates Dr. Ariane Alimenti on 20 years of service



Dr Ariane Alimenti

Dr. Ariane Alimenti, a pediatric HIV expert, is stepping down from her role at the BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre's Oak Tree Clinic after nearly 20 years of service. Dr. Alimenti has cared for children impacted by HIV since the beginning of the HIV epidemic. She and the interdisciplinary team at Oak Tree provide specialized care for women living with HIV and their children before, during, and after pregnancy.

The Oak Tree Clinic is closely linked with the BC-CfE, receiving its HIV Medications through the Drug Treatment Program, and several of its doctors are on the CfE's HIV guidelines committees.

Dr. Alimenti, also a UBC clinical assistant professor in the Department of Pediatrics, has been involved in several significant clinical research projects out of the Oak Tree Clinic. She and her team coordinate a Canadian surveillance program of HIV transmission between mothers and infants. For children and adolescents living with HIV in BC, Dr. Alimenti investigates the long-term effects of living with HIV and the potential effects of medications on bone health.

Her research also investigates the potential long-term health effects of exposure to anti-HIV drugs during prenatal life in children living without HIV, but born to seropositive mothers.

This critical research enhances best practices and improves evidence-informed care. The BC-CfE is proud to be associated with Dr. Alimenti, who has spent her career creating awareness about the complex issues women and children face while living with HIV.

Dr. Marianne Harris, a clinical research physician at the BC-CfE said of Dr. Alimenti, "Throughout her career at the Oak Tree Clinic, Ariane has made a meaningful contribution to the care and well-being of children living with HIV in BC. Her wisdom and compassion will be greatly missed by her patients and their families, and by her colleagues at the BC-CfE."

BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

- > Improve the health of British Columbians with HIV through comprehensive research and treatment programs;
- > Develop cost-effective research and therapeutic protocols;
- > Provide educational support programs to health-care professionals;
- > Monitor the impact of HIV/AIDS on BC and conduct analyses of the effectiveness of HIV-related programs.

Physician Drug Hotline
1.800.665.7677

St. Paul's Hospital Pharmacy Hotline
1.888.511.6222

Website
www.bccfe.ca

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info@bccfe.ca

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