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## COVID-19 Vaccine Guidance for Patients with Autoimmune Diseases

We have received many questions regarding the use of COVID-19 vaccines in patient with autoimmune diseases on a wide range of advanced therapies such as biologics. The first thing to be aware of, is that the studies done for these vaccines did not include patients with autoimmune diseases or those on treatments that may suppress the immune system. Current advice about being vaccinated, is based on expert opinion knowing this is a non-live vaccine. **The general opinion of specialists in the field is that the benefit of getting a COVID-19 vaccine far outweighs the risk.**

### What you should know:

- The COVID-19 vaccines currently available are non-live. They cannot cause COVID-19 when given to any patient.
- The effectiveness of any vaccine given to people who have an autoimmune condition may be less effective than the public. **This does not prevent you from receiving the vaccine as having a lesser effect is much better than no effect at all.**
- We know that the infused medication rituximab can significantly blunt vaccine benefit. The suggestion would be to wait until 5-5.5 months after your last dose of rituximab and receive your COVID-19 vaccine. Then receive the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine (in the case of the Pfizer vaccine this is 3 weeks later). Then wait an additional 2 weeks, at which time you can resume rituximab treatment.
- Prednisone can blunt the benefit of vaccines when used in doses of 20mg per day or higher for more than 14 days. If you are weaning off prednisone, waiting until your dose is less than 20mg/day would be advised for greater benefit.
- The COVID-19 vaccines by Pfizer and Moderna are called mRNA vaccines. When mRNA-based treatments have been given in the past, there was a potential for an inflammatory response. These vaccines have made modifications to prevent this, but you should know that a short-term flare of your condition could happen. This means that if possible, it would be best to be vaccinated when you are in good control.
- Other vaccines such as Shingrix for Herpes Zoster (shingles) protection, were released onto the Canadian market with no studies in this population. As this vaccine was non-live and had great benefit, we widely gave it to patients knowing that it may be less effective in this group of people and that there could be a short-term flare of their inflammatory condition. As time passed, we collected data on this group of patients and found that they had a 90% benefit vs over 97% in the general public. This is still a fabulous response. We also learned that about 5% of people had a flare of their inflammatory condition for 1-2 weeks.
- We have learned that **anyone** receiving this vaccine can experience about 24-48 hours of certain symptoms which include: fatigue, headache, sore arm, low-grade fever, and general achiness.
- A few people receiving the vaccine who had a background of anaphylactic reactions to foods such as shellfish, had an anaphylactic reaction to the COVID-19 vaccine. This does not prevent people with food allergies receiving the vaccine but does suggest that anyone who carries an EpiPen and has high sensitivities to allergens should have an EpiPen on hand for the vaccine administration.

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- The COVID-19 vaccines have not been studied when given at the same time as other vaccines. It is suggested to wait 28 days after the final COVID-19 vaccine injection before giving any other vaccines (live or non-live). If you have recently received another vaccine, wait at least 2 weeks before getting the COVID-19 vaccine.
- Although your rheumatologist is recommending the COVID-19 vaccination when available, if you are vaccinated that doesn't mean that you can stop social distancing, using mask, washing your hands frequently, or ignoring public health measures.
- Your rheumatologist can't comment on when you can expect to be vaccinated. That is a public health decision and depends on vaccine supply and how the provincial government decides to roll out the vaccination program.

Thank you,

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