



ALASTAIR GRANT / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES

The two-dose Novavax COVID-19 shot can be given as a followup to one or two mRNA shots. Despite a large supply of the shots in the province, only 13 per cent of eligible Manitobans have opted for a second booster shot.

Low uptake for second booster in province; care home association head warns against COVID complacency

Novavax doses piling up in Manitoba

DYLAN ROBERTSON

JUST 13 per cent of eligible Manitobans have had their fourth shot of COVID-19 vaccine, as the province takes in a disproportionate supply of Novavax shots for those dead-set against mRNA doses.

As of May 1, just 4,057 Manitobans aged 50 and older had their fourth shot; the province estimates 30,760 people in that age group are eligible, based on six months passing since their third shot.

That amounts to 0.8 per cent of the overall population aged 50 or older having a fourth dose, including those who don't yet qualify under the guideline to wait six months since the third dose.

Of those aged 80 and over, just 1.9 per cent have their fourth shot. Among those aged 70 and up, just 1.5 per cent are quadruple-vaccinated, amounting to one-fifth of the 12,221 people in that age range who are eligible for a fourth dose.

Meanwhile, Manitoba has received 10,250 doses of the Novavax shot from Ottawa. That amounts to 13 per cent of the national supply, despite Manitoba

making up less than four per cent of the country's population.

The Novavax shot uses classic vaccination technology, including a piece of protein that is also found on the edge of the novel coronavirus.

That protein is meant to train the body to produce an immune response, so it will combat the early onset of exposure to an actual virus particle, instead of the body only catching on after the coronavirus has wreaked havoc.

Canada has relied much more on mRNA technology, a vaccine type that has been decades in development but relatively new in wide-scale vaccine rollouts. That technology includes genetic code that prompts the body to produce a piece of protein, instead of including actual pieces in the syringe.

Some vaccine-hesitant people have claimed they'd be willing to get a Novavax shot, out of a belief it is significantly less risky, though a vast swath of virologists argue this isn't the case.

Meanwhile, the *Toronto Star* reported Alberta and Manitoba received roughly the same number of Novavax doses, despite Alberta having three times as

many people.

A Manitoba government spokesman said the province ordered doses based on feedback from doctors.

"It was difficult to estimate demand for Novavax, and as such, Manitoba took a prudent approach to prevent over-stocking," the province wrote.

"As part of the decision-making process, Manitoba immunizers were surveyed and asked to estimate the demand they expected to see from their clients."

As of last week, nearly 80 doses of Novavax have been administered in Manitoba, but that doesn't include doctor's offices, which made up the bulk of shots by the time the Novavax vaccine arrived in the province in mid-April, as Manitoba was ramping down super sites.

The Novavax shot requires two doses, and can be given as a followup to one or two mRNA shots, or as a two-shot series of the same Novavax vaccine. Under federal recommendations, those shots should be eight weeks apart for most people.

As for fourth doses, anyone over 70

is eligible, as well as Indigenous people over 50, and any residents of personal care homes and congregate living, such as assisted living. But the province recommends waiting six months after the third dose.

"Just over 60 per cent of personal care homes in the province will have provided second booster doses to residents by the week of May 16," the province wrote, with the rest lining up clinics through to July, to make the six-month mark in some homes.

The Long Term & Continuing Care Association of Manitoba said the shots are being administered inside of personal care homes, with the support of regional health authorities. Pharmacies that partner with care homes are also helping, similar to the annual flu-shot campaigns.

"I understand that things are well underway, and going very smoothly," said association head Jan Legeros.

Unlike at the start of the vaccination clinic, care home staff can get their shots alongside residents. Legeros said that's a huge help, as some staff don't speak English well and rely on public

transit, making it a challenge to reach super sites or clinics.

"Often they would need help with their consent form, because they are just learning English, and they could be very intimidated going to a super site," she said.

However, Legeros warned COVID-19 has become pervasive in congregate living situations. Some 20 of Winnipeg's 38 personal care homes had COVID-19 outbreaks last week, she said.

"We are still seeing tragedy in long-term care," she said, noting vaccination has helped prevent death, but not in all cases.

"We still have significant concerns about COVID entering the personal care homes where we have our most vulnerable folks, with multiple physical and psychological problems. They are certainly the ones who could have the worst outcomes."

Legeros warned the public should not be complacent about COVID-19, urging people to reduce spread by keeping a distance and limiting case contacts.

dylan.robertson@freepress.mb.ca