

**Protecting Our Most Vulnerable**

*Prioritise access to Covid-19 vaccination for seniors with dementia living in the community, and their care partners.*

January 27, 2021

Ontario has pulled together in the year since Covid-19 first arrived in our communities. A year of sacrifices is now giving way to hope: widespread access to safe, effective vaccines is the light at the end of a long tunnel. This hope is tempered by recent news that expected vaccine shipments have been cancelled or delayed, a stark reminder that even with vaccines approved, it will be months before supply exceeds demand. Until such a time, access is being prioritised according to risk.

Seniors with dementia who live in the community, outside of long-term care or retirement homes, must receive early access to approved Covid-19 vaccines in line with the elevated risk facing this population.

Age and underlying health conditions are both among the greatest factors associated with increased risk of complications from Covid-19<sup>1</sup>. The majority of people living with dementia experience these risk factors: age is the greatest risk factor for dementia, with one in four Canadians above the age of 85 living with dementia. Ninety per cent of Canadians living with dementia have at least one other chronic condition, and 20% have five or more<sup>2</sup>. Being closely associated with age and multiple comorbidities, Alzheimer's disease and other dementias were identified as the most common underlying health condition reported among Covid-19 fatalities in Canadians aged 65 and older—and for those 85 and older, Alzheimer's disease and dementia was listed as an underlying health condition in 46% of reported deaths during the first wave<sup>3</sup>.

Amplifying the already elevated risk among seniors living with dementia is the difficulty this population can experience following public health guidelines. Seniors living with dementia may wander and/or exit-seek, not understanding the need to maintain physical distancing and, in some locations, follow directional arrows. Mask-wearing is also a barrier for people living with dementia: in the mid- and late-stages of the disease, individuals can struggle to recognise their family and friends, more so when their faces are obstructed. People living with dementia may not always understand the importance of wearing a face covering themselves, and remembering to wash their hands regularly—and properly—can be challenging.

Care partners to a senior living with dementia have made tremendous sacrifices throughout this pandemic, often isolating at home alongside their family member or friend to ensure they do not leave the house, or do so with proper precautions. Care partners to a senior living with

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<sup>1</sup> "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public". World Health Organization, November 23 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "A Dementia Strategy for Canada: 2020 Annual Report". Public Health Agency of Canada, June 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "COVID-19 death comorbidities in Canada". Statistics Canada, November 16 2020.

dementia report higher levels of distress than other care partners, and are particularly vulnerable to the loneliness and isolation that arise when staying at home for extended periods of time<sup>4</sup>. Priority access to Covid-19 vaccines would benefit not only the senior living with dementia, but also their care partner(s).

The Government of Ontario has committed to vaccinating “individuals with high-risk chronic conditions and their caregivers”<sup>5</sup> in phase two of the vaccine rollout strategy. **The Alzheimer Society calls for seniors living with dementia to be explicitly included as a priority population for vaccination during phase two**, inclusive of care partners to these individuals.

### **For further information**

Kyle Fitzgerald  
Manager, Public Policy and Government Relations, Alzheimer Society of Ontario  
[kfitzgerald@alzon.ca](mailto:kfitzgerald@alzon.ca) / (905) 259-2991

### **Media contact**

[pr@alzsoc.ca](mailto:pr@alzsoc.ca)

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<sup>4</sup> “Dementia in Canada”. Canadian Institute for Health Information, June 26 2018.

<sup>5</sup> “Ontario to Vaccinate up to 8.5 Million People in Phase Two”. Government of Ontario, January 13 2021.