

For immediate release

The facts about the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine and blood clots

Montreal, April 12, 2021 - The overwhelming consensus among thrombosis experts is that the COVID-19 vaccination developed by Astra-Zeneca and Oxford University is safe and effective.

Concerns had been raised by some European health agencies about a possible association between the AstraZeneca vaccine and blood clots, leading a few countries to pause their deployment of it.

“These events are extremely rare occurrences,” emphasizes Dr. Susan Kahn, the Director of the Centre for Excellence in Thrombosis and Anticoagulation Care at the Jewish General Hospital and an internationally renowned expert in the field. “Blood clots actually occur at a far higher rate in the general population than among people who have received the AstraZeneca vaccine.”

Health Canada has reviewed the data and “has determined that the AstraZeneca vaccine has not been associated with an increase in the overall risk of blood clots.” It has updated labels to include “very rare reports of blood clots associated with low levels of blood platelets,” but reaffirms that the benefits outweigh the risks and advises people to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

In Canada, use of this vaccine has been approved for people over the age of 55. As a precaution, the use of AstraZeneca has been suspended for people under the age of 55 until expert assessments of the cause of the adverse events is completed.

As of the end of March, among more than 20 million people who have been given AstraZeneca across Europe, there had been 79 cases, and 19 deaths, making for a risk of about four in one million of developing a blood clot, and one in a million of dying. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) has affirmed its safety and efficacy and recommends it. Of those countries that had temporarily suspended its use, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain have resumed dosing.

The World Health Organization (WHO) issued the following statement, “Thromboembolic events are known to occur frequently [in the general population]. Venous thromboembolism is the third most common cardiovascular disease globally. . . . At this time, WHO considers that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine outweigh its risks and recommends that vaccinations continue.”

Dr. Kahn serves on the Technical Expert Panel on Thrombostasis of the WHO Advisory Group on Therapeutics Prioritization for COVID-19 and concurs with the WHO position.

Thrombosis Canada has said, “based on all available evidence, people who receive the AstraZeneca vaccine are not at increased risk of developing blood clots when compared with the general population.” It went on to “strongly” recommend that people take the AstraZeneca vaccine. The International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis (ISTH) concurs, “Based on all available data, the ISTH believes that the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination strongly outweigh any potential complications even for patients with a history of blood clots or for those taking blood thinning medications.”

“It’s also important to remember that COVID-19 infection is associated with a risk of thrombosis that is exponentially higher than the association with the AstraZeneca vaccine,” said Dr. Kahn, a Professor of Medicine at McGill University. Indeed, Thrombosis Canada cites the following data: cerebral sinus vein thrombosis (CSVT), the rare blood clot of the brain that was observed, occurred in between one in 250,000 and one in 500,000 people who received the vaccine. By comparison, about one in 20 people hospitalized with COVID-19 and about one in 100 people who have COVID-19 but are not hospitalized develop blood clots, usually in the leg veins or lungs.

“Thus,” Dr. Kahn continues, “people who refuse the AstraZeneca vaccine for fear of blood clots are actually exposing themselves to greater risk by going unprotected against COVID-19.”

She adds that people who fall ill with COVID-19 can experience extensive inflammation, which can stimulate the production of clotting factors and result in thrombosis. Inflammatory lung disease brought on by COVID-19 can cause the formation of tiny blood clots that impair blood flow in the lungs and can worsen respiratory distress. The AstraZeneca vaccine has proven to be highly effective in preventing severe COVID-19 disease.

“I advise my patients who have had thrombosis in the past to take the AstraZeneca vaccine,” said Dr. Kahn, “because it is far better to be protected against the infection.”

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