

## **Ensuring a safe and successful fall semester**

As the start of the Fall 2021 semester approaches, the University of Lethbridge is eager to welcome students, faculty and staff back to campus after nearly 18 months of largely remote class delivery and working from home.

“I’m looking forward to seeing everybody back and welcoming them to a community whose members support each other to create a healthy and safe environment for all, so we can enjoy the experience the University of Lethbridge is known for,” says Kathleen Massey, associate vice-president students.

### **Vaccinations are key to a safe return to campus**

To ensure a successful fall semester, we encourage everyone to get vaccinated against the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a way to help make that happen.

“A return to campus after more than a year of online learning represents a time of excitement for sure, but also anxiety because we have had such a year of isolation and not being able to see one another,” says Holly Kletke, University of Lethbridge Students’ Union (ULSU) president. “Part of being a student is feeling pride in your institution and also recognizing your own responsibility and agency to make choices every day to keep your peers and yourself safe. We’d like to affirm our position that getting vaccinated is the best way to do all that.”

Priyanka Dutt, president of the Graduate Students’ Association (GSA), is heartened to know the majority of students she’s been in contact with are either vaccinated or taking steps to make sure they’re fully vaccinated by September.

“We, as a community, have a duty to ensure all our members are protected,” says Dutt. “One of my primary drivers to receive the vaccine is my family, specifically my grandmother and my parents, who all have co-morbidities. Ensuring I have the protection to help protect them from viral agents is a very big deal to me.”

### **Feeling hesitant about getting vaccinated?**

While getting vaccinated against the SARS-CoV-2 virus is highly encouraged, it is not mandatory. However, studies show the risks of getting COVID-19 sharply decline when more people are vaccinated.

“Growing up, we all received different vaccines,” says Dr. Trushar Patel, a professor of chemistry and biochemistry with expertise in RNA and viruses. “Vaccines are a normal part of human lives that allow us to protect ourselves from future pathogenic exposures. This is not a new concept. In this particular case, the lack of vaccinations will allow the new variants to

continue to evolve. If we want to be safe and our community to be safe, then we all need to do our part.”

Patel says the best ways to stop spreading infection are to get vaccinated and continue wearing masks in indoor settings where social distancing isn’t possible. Research studies show countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, that started effective vaccination campaigns and reached 55 and 68 per cent of the population respectively, are now experiencing significant increases in COVID-19 cases because new variants are spreading mainly among the unvaccinated population.

“Vaccinated people can potentially be exposed to the virus but they’ll fight it off very rapidly,” says Patel. “The current data show the vaccines are effective in combatting variants.”

Patel is aware vaccine hesitancy still exists and points to the long-established science and current data to support the fact they are effective.

“As of July 16, more than 3.57 billion doses of vaccine have been administered across the world,” says Patel. “That equals 47 doses for every 100 people. Some people have said they’ll wait to get the vaccine until other people have received the shots and they can see how it works, but the fact that more than 3.57 billion people have been vaccinated should bring them some comfort.”

And if anyone would like to discuss their concerns, Patel says he’s happy to make himself available to answer any questions.

### **Looking ahead to better times**

“Getting vaccinated is the way through and out of the pandemic,” adds Massey. “It’s the way to keep each other, our community and those who cannot get vaccinated for a variety of reasons safe. Vaccinations will allow us all to have a fulsome, engaging experience on campus this fall where we can gather with friends, participate in clubs and have events without the cloud of illness hanging over our heads.”

The U of L’s [\*It’s Worth a Shot\*](#) campaign, designed to help motivate students, staff and faculty to get vaccinated, has seen nearly 3,400 students and 830 staff enter the contest. Its goal is to hasten a return to normal.

“There’s also a trade-off to not getting vaccinated,” says Massey. “Whether it’s concerts, other types of events or entry to certain countries, restrictions are being put in place to limit those activities for people who are not vaccinated.”

The ULSU has even added additional prizes to the student lottery as extra motivation, including free health and dental insurance for a year, a year-long UPass and Fresh Fest tickets. Entries for staff and faculty are being accepted until Aug. 2 and for students, until Sept. 8.

“The beginning of the semester is only a few weeks away and I can’t wait to see all the students and my fellow colleagues,” says Massey. “There’s nothing quite like the energy that September brings and I’m excited to see our campus come alive again.”