Vaccine breakthrough infections in a highly-vaccinated Australian population during a SARS-CoV-2 Delta outbreak

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# Abstract

Over 80% of residents in the Australian Capital Territory were fully vaccinated within 10 weeks of a SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant outbreak. Of the outbreak’s 1,545 cases, 10% were breakthrough infections. The incidence of infections among fully- and partially-vaccinated people was 98.5% and 90% lower, respectively, than for unvaccinated people.

Keywords: COVID-19 breakthrough infections, Australian Capital Territory, COVID-19, outbreak, SARS-CoV-2 Delta, vaccination

# Study setting

After more than a year of zero cases of community-acquired coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) recorded its first locally-acquired case due to infection from SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant on 12 August 2021. To limit transmission, the ACT introduced a series of public health and social measures, including a strict lockdown wherein people were only allowed to leave home for five essential reasons: essential shopping; care giving; seeking healthcare; essential work; and outdoor exercise. Mask use was required for all instances of leaving the house.1

In February 2021, the ACT commenced a COVID-19 vaccination program using Cominarty and Vaxzeria vaccines for residents aged ≥ 12 years. In line with Australia’s national vaccine roll-out, the program initially prioritised high-risk groups for infection or severe disease, including health workers and people aged ≥ 70 years.2 At the start of the Delta outbreak, 50.2% of ACT residents aged ≥12 years (183,051/364,321) had received one dose of either vaccine and 26.5% (96,601/364,321) had received two doses. Here we report data on SARS-CoV-2 infections in fully-vaccinated and one-dose-vaccinated persons in a setting of high epidemic control.

# Methods

In the ACT, a confirmed COVID-19 case required laboratory evidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection demonstrated by nucleic acid testing of combined oropharyngeal and deep nasal swabs.3 We verified vaccination status from the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR). We excluded cases with missing or invalidated records on the AIR database. Population denominator data was sourced from the ACT’s Treasury and Economic Development Directorate projection for June 2021. For population denominator data on vaccinated persons, vaccination coverage data were extracted at the end of each week if they reported the ACT as their residence at the time of vaccination. The population was restricted to those aged ≥ 12 years and resident within the ACT based on the Statistical Local Area. Unvaccinated populations were estimated by subtracting the vaccinated population from the total population of the ACT.

Public health staff interviewed all cases to determine demographic details and to identify close contacts, movements and outcomes of illness, including symptom details and timing. We defined the ‘diagnosis date’ of cases as the date of first symptom onset or specimen date collection where onset date was unavailable.

We classified cases into five categories based on the time interval between the diagnosis date and the last dose of a vaccine (Table 1). An additional category of partially vaccinated was included if a confirmed case had received one dose of the vaccine independent of the time interval or two doses < 14 days prior to diagnosis date. We used Stata 15 to estimate incidence rate ratios for infection amongst fully-vaccinated persons (breakthrough infections) compared to partially-vaccinated and unvaccinated persons, after adjusting for age group using negative binomial regression.

****Table 1: Classification of confirmed COVID-19 cases as per immunisation history, Australian Capital Territory, 2021.****

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Case category | Definitions for vaccination status of confirmed cases |
| Breakthrough | COVID-19 diagnosed ≥ 14 days after second dose of COVID-19 vaccine. |
| 2 doses < 14 days | COVID-19 diagnosed < 14 days after second dose of COVID-19 vaccine. |
| 1 dose | COVID-19 diagnosed ≥ 21 days after first dose of COVID-19 vaccine. |
| 1 dose < 21 days | COVID-19 diagnosed < 21 days after first dose of COVID-19 vaccine. |
| Unvaccinated | COVID-19 in a person with no documented proof on AIR of COVID-19 vaccination. |
| Partial | COVID-19 in a person in one of the ‘2 doses < 14 days’; ‘1 dose’; or ‘1 dose < 21 days’ categories |

# Results

The ACT recorded 1,578 cases of the Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 between 12 August and 17 October 2021. In response to the outbreak, the ACT population rapidly achieved ≥ 80% two-dose coverage for persons aged ≥ 12 years, with ≥ 95% one-dose COVID-19 vaccine coverage (Figure 1). As of 17 October 2021, vaccination status was validated for 97.9% (1,545/1,578) of confirmed COVID-19 cases associated with the ACT outbreak. We identified 9.5% of cases (147/1,545) as breakthrough infections; a further 4.9% of cases (75/1,545) had received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine (Table 2) 21 days or more before the diagnosis date. Overall, 21.9% (338/1,545) were partially vaccinated. Fourteen persons received a vaccine dose after being diagnosed with COVID-19.

In total, 7.0% of cases (108/1,545) were hospitalised for any reason during their COVID-19 illness, of which 3.7% (4/108) were breakthrough infections, compared with 76.9% of hospitalised cases (83/108) who were unvaccinated, and 19.4% (21/108) who were partially vaccinated.

The median time from receipt of the second dose to breakthrough infection was 48 days (range 14–185 days).

Most breakthrough infections occurred through transmission within households (57.1%; 84/147) and within long-term care facilities (9.5%; 14/147); these are high-risk settings due to extended close contact and high viral exposure. Of all breakthrough infections, 9.5% (14/147) were in healthcare workers, including aged care workers.

In the ACT, after adjusting for age, the incidence of infections among fully vaccinated cases was 98.5% lower than for unvaccinated cases (incident rate ratio, IRR: 0.015; 95% confidence interval [95% CI]: 0.009–0.024). The incidence of COVID-19 in partially-vaccinated people was 90% lower than for unvaccinated persons (IRR: 0.10; 95% CI: 0.067–0.156).

****Table 2: Characteristics of persons with documented SARS-CoV-2 infection after vaccination compared with infection in those who were not vaccinated,a Australian Capital Territory, 11 August 2021 – 17 October 2021****

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Breakthrough  N (%) | Two doses < 14 days  N (%) | One dose  N (%) | One dose < 21 days  N (%) | Unvaccinated  N (%) | Total  N (%) |
| **Total** | **147 (9.5)** | **51 (3.3)** | **75 (4.9)** | **212 (13.7)** | **1,060 (68.6)** | **1,545 (100)** |
| **Age** | | | | | | |
| < 12 years | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 272 (25.7) | 272 (17.6) |
| 12–15 years | 0 (0) | 3 (5.9) | 2 (2.7) | 15 (7.1) | 93 (8.8) | 113 (7.3) |
| 16–29 years | 22 (15) | 17 (33.3) | 23 (30.7) | 74 (34.9) | 338 (31.9) | 474 (30.7) |
| 30–39 years | 24 (16.3) | 9 (17.6) | 16 (21.3) | 60 (28.3) | 176 (16.6) | 285 (18.4) |
| 40–49 years | 31 (21.1) | 9 (17.6) | 11 (14.7) | 39 (18.4) | 109 (10.3) | 199 (12.9) |
| 50–59 years | 35 (23.8) | 8 (15.7) | 11 (14.7) | 18 (8.5) | 37 (3.5) | 109 (7.1) |
| ≥ 60 years | 35 (23.8) | 5 (9.8) | 12 (16) | 6 (2.8) | 35 (3.3) | 93 (6.0) |
| **Sex** | | | | | | |
| Male | 79 (53.7) | 30 (58.8) | 23 (30.7) | 103 (48.6) | 486 (45.8) | 721 (46.7) |
| Female | 68 (46.3) | 21 (41.2) | 52 (69.3) | 109 (51.4) | 574 (54.2) | 824 (53.3) |
| Indigenous statusb | | | | | | |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander | 8 (5.4) | 1 (2) | 5 (6.7) | 22 (10.4) | 139 (13.1) | 175 (11.3) |
| Non-Indigenous | 138 (93.9) | 50 (98) | 70 (93.3) | 190 (89.6) | 914 (86.2) | 1362 (88.2) |
| **Experienced symptomsc** | | | | | | |
| Yes | 120 (81.6) | 42 (82.4) | 58 (77.3) | 177 (83.5) | 892 (84.2) | 1289 (83.4) |
| No | 20 (13.6) | 9 (17.6) | 14 (18.7) | 32 (15.1) | 152 (14.3) | 227 (14.7) |
| **Hospitalisedd** | | | | | | |
| Yes | 4 (2.7) | 6 (11.8) | 4 (5.3) | 11 (5.2) | 83 (7.8) | 108 (7) |
| No (including unavailable) | 143 (97.3) | 45 (88.2) | 71 (94.7) | 201 (94.8) | 977 (92.2) | 1,437 (93) |

a Diagnosis date of cases was defined as first symptom onset date, or as specimen date when onset date was unavailable.

b Data unavailable on eight cases.

c Data unavailable on 29 cases.

d Includes hospitalisations due to and with COVID-19.

****Figure 1: Numbers of COVID-19 cases and COVID-19 vaccination coverage, Australian Capital Territory, 11 August 2021 – 17 October 2021****

# Discussion and conclusion

In the ACT, early intervention with extensive public health and social measures along with a rapid roll-out and high uptake of COVID-19 vaccines resulted in suppression of the COVID-19 outbreak associated with the Delta SARS-CoV-2 variant. Breakthrough infections accounted for 10% of all cases, but the risk of COVID-19 in fully-vaccinated persons was dramatically lower. Only 2.7% of people with breakthrough infections (4/147) were hospitalised. In the ACT, it was important to note that the relationship between incidence and vaccination status may be confounded by ability or willingness to comply with public health measures, such as community-wide lockdown. Emerging international evidence during the Delta surge suggested that fully vaccinated persons remained at risk of SARS-CoV-2, but the incidence and severity varied on individual immune responses, and by setting and level of community transmission.4 In England, during the peak of Delta surge in June-July 2021, the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 amongst vaccinated persons was 0.40% (n = 55,962) compared with 1.21% amongst unvaccinated persons (n = 15,135).5

The lower incidence of COVID-19 in partially-vaccinated persons highlights the benefits of a single dose of vaccine against COVID-19. At the population level, these findings supported a rapid roll-out of the vaccine along with public health and social measures including contact tracing in outbreak settings. In the outbreak setting, the emphasis on maximising one-dose coverage was critical.

The majority of breakthrough infections occurred in households and long-term care facilities, which is expected given the force of infection and the regular exposure to an infected person in residential settings.6,7 Data from the United Kingdom, examining transmission and viral kinetics, found that individuals with breakthrough infections had peak viral load similar to unvaccinated cases, but had faster mean rate of viral load decline.8 The secondary attack rate within households exposed to the Delta variant was 25% (95% CI: 18–33%) for fully vaccinated persons, compared to 38% (95% CI: 24–53%) in unvaccinated persons.8

We did not observe any notable trend between time-from-vaccine and breakthrough infections, but this may be due to the small numbers of breakthrough infections. Examining breakthrough infections over time is important due to concerns about waning immunity, particularly among healthcare workers and the immunocompromised.9 While most breakthrough infections occurred in high-risk transmission settings of households, we were unable to examine the immune status of household contacts that did not become cases, which will be important for future studies.

Rapid wide-scale vaccination played a critical role in reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the ACT during an outbreak of the Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2.

# Acknowledgement

We thank members of the ACT Health Public Health Emergency Coordination Centre, particularly case investigators, epidemiologists, and the vaccine operation team for data collection. We thank the laboratory staff involved in the testing of specimens and reporting of results. Additionally, we thank the following people for their assistance: Mr Mark Leslie and Mr Mric Gomez for validating the vaccination status of cases; Ms Anne Jenkins for providing data on vaccination coverage; and A/Prof Katie Glass for statistical advice.

# Funding

MS is supported by a fellowship from the Westpac Scholars Trust. MDK is supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council Fellowship (APP1145997).

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**Communicable Diseases Intelligence**

ISSN: 2209-6051 Online

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**Contacts**CDI is produced by the Office of Health Protection and Response, Australian Government Department of Health, GPO Box 9848, (MDP 6) CANBERRA ACT 2601

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