

EU seeks common strategy on swine flu vaccine

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EU Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou on Tuesday called for a common European strategy on producing and using a swine flu vaccine, emphasising the need to focus on those most vulnerable.

"I think it is very important member states reach agreement on the modalities of production, availability and distribution of the [vaccine](#)," she told reporters as she arrived for a meeting of EU health ministers in Luxembourg.

"We need to have a vaccine by the autumn, and if there is not enough vaccine for everyone then we need to decide on priority groups to be vaccinated first," such as the elderly and the handicapped, and emergency services workers, she added.

"We won't have enormous quantities of the vaccine available from day one."

The possibility of the World Health Organisation (WHO) announcing the maximum [pandemic](#) alert -- currently level five out of six -- "is on all our minds," admitted Vassiliou.

Such a step would "make it even more important for the vaccine to be equally and equitably distributed," she added. Swine flu has now spread to 73 countries with 25,288 people known to have been infected since the disease was first uncovered in April, WHO data showed Monday.

In a note distributed to EU health ministers, the commission admitted that if there were major differences between EU nations about who the priority groups were, then citizens may engage in "vaccine tourism/shopping in other member states."

The number of deaths has risen to 139 according to the latest WHO tally of confirmed influenza A(H1N1) cases.

Under WHO guidelines, one key criteria for a move to the highest phase six alert would be established community spread in a country outside the region where the disease was initially reported, in this case, outside the Americas.

Many European nations have confirmed cases of the flu but so far most of the fatalities from the disease have been recorded in Mexico, and all the rest in the Americas.

German Health Minister Ulla Schmidt, attending the meeting in Luxembourg, echoed that there should be joint European analysis of the dangers of [swine flu](#) and "the means to protect citizens".

Among the decisions to be made are: which vaccine should be used, how much vaccine should be produced, who should receive it, what stocks should be kept and how to help out poorer nations.

Schmidt said European level discussions were important, "otherwise we risk leaving the playing field to the pharmaceutical industry."

The EU commission recognised that seven European nations already had advance purchases agreements with vaccine makers, and negotiations were ongoing in nine other countries.

Last month the WHO said it had sent three "seed viruses" to drug

companies for use in making a vaccine against the new strain of [influenza](#).

WHO interim Assistant Director General Keiji Fukuda said the pharmaceutical industry should be ready to produce a preventive vaccine by the end of June or early July.

However, experts are still mulling whether to give the go ahead with production as this may reduce or halt the manufacture of vaccines for seasonal flu.

Other issues still to be ironed out include whether one or two doses would be needed to obtain immunity and the cost of development, production, distribution and application of the eventual vaccine.

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