

# Mexico pushing for homegrown swine flu vaccine

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A worker shows a vial of Panenza, a vaccine for the H1N1 flu virus, at a Sanofi-Pasteur production plant in Val-de-Reuil, western Paris, Monday, Oct. 19, 2009. France will begin vaccinating key medical workers against swine flu on Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2009. (AP Photo/Jacques Brinon)

(AP) -- Grappling with low supplies of swine flu vaccines, President Felipe Calderon persuaded drug makers this week to sell him 30 million doses, while 1,000 Mexicans lined up for an experimental vaccine they hope can speed up supplies.

Meanwhile, French drug maker Sanofi-Aventis announced plans to open a manufacturing plant in Mexico that will produce 25 million flu [vaccine](#) doses a year starting in 2012.

Officials are eager to get the plant off the ground, Mexican Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova told reporters Thursday.

"There is a big commitment to this and we are working in a very coordinated manner," he said.

If a community can vaccinate before the virus arrives, that can reduce the number of severe cases and fatalities, and it can slow the spread, because the flu has trouble establishing itself in a population.

After the first case of [swine flu](#) in the world was confirmed in Mexico last April, drug makers immediately began making vaccines to control a potential pandemic.

But most of those supplies were snapped up by the world's wealthiest countries, including the United States, Canada and those in western Europe, which wanted to ensure they had enough doses should a pandemic emerge. Norway and Switzerland, for example, have about twice as much vaccine as they need.

The U.S. has contracted with vaccine makers to produce and distribute up to 100 million doses, with the ability to produce 150 million more should the need arise this [flu season](#), according to the Centers for Disease Control.

The CDC's goal is to provide vaccine to anyone who wants it, but right now the U.S. is only receiving half the supply it expected for October due to slow production, said Dr. Mark Mullican, a researcher at the Emory Vaccine Center in Decatur, Georgia.

In Mexico, where vaccine supplies are much lower, officials plan only to provide vaccine to high-risk groups, including health care workers, pregnant women, day care workers and 6-month-old to 23-month-old

youngsters, said Dr. Diana Leticia Coronel, director of the infant and adolescent health program. A prescription will be required, she said.

For the past 30 years it has taken drug makers about six months to make a new vaccine, growing the virus inside chicken eggs. This week in Mexico a small company began testing swine [flu vaccine](#) cultivated in a new way: inside insect cells.

Dr. Rahul Singhvi, president and CEO of Novavax Inc., the company manufacturing the new vaccine, said: "We absolutely want to help Mexico in getting more vaccine. We want to save lives in Mexico."

U.s experts praised the idea.

"In general, we need new technologies, such as the insect cell approach, that do not require egg-based growth of the vaccine, which is slow and has problems," said Mullican, the Emory researcher.

Dr. Andrew Pekosz at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health said the speedier technique could save lives. "The most important thing about these new technologies is the speed in which a vaccine can be generated," he said.

Pekosz said the insect cell method of making vaccines doesn't make it more dangerous. "The vaccine itself is purified away from the components of the insect cell," he said.

While awaiting successful clinical trials, Mexican officials are moving forward, trying to buy what vaccine they can.

Cordova said Thursday that Sanofi Pasteur, a division of Sanofi-Aventis, has guaranteed to send 1 million doses by the end of November. Cordova said the doses will be used to vaccinate health care workers.

The company will provide 4 million more doses by the end of December and 15 million by the end of January, Cordova said. Sanofi Pasteur officials reached the agreement with Mexico's president in a meeting Thursday morning.

Ten million additional doses will be manufactured by London-based GlaxoSmithKline, Cordova said.

A new wave of swine flu began to flare up in Mexico last month, and officials say it will continue into early 2010. As of Monday, [Mexico](#) has had 45,809 reported cases of swine flu and 271 deaths.

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