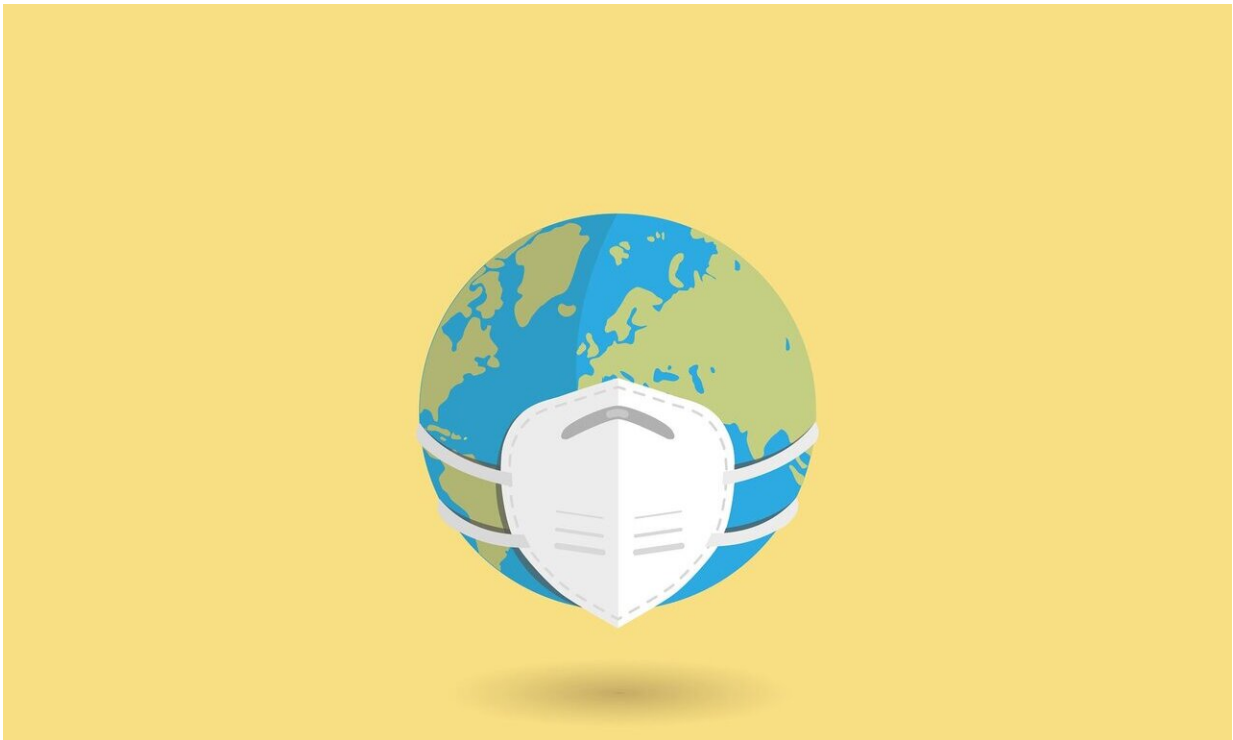


EU sees vaccinations within months as cases top 1 million in Italy

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The European Union expressed hope Wednesday that it could start vaccinating people against the novel coronavirus as early as next year, as Italy recorded more than one million cases and Britain said its death toll has surpassed the 50,000 mark.

The head of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Andrea Ammon, told AFP that a vaccination programme could be kicked off "optimistically (in the) first quarter next year, but I can't be more precise," as trials in both the US and Russia suggested that vaccines currently in the final stages of testing were so far proving very effective.

A vaccine is seen as the best chance to break the cycle of deadly virus surges and severe restrictions across much of the world since COVID-19 first emerged in China late last year and ballooned into a pandemic.

So the announcement by US pharma giant Pfizer on Monday that a vaccine it is developing with Germany's BioNTech is 90 percent effective has sparked a wave of optimism across the globe that the pandemic might soon be brought under control.

And the news Wednesday that Russia's own Sputnik V vaccine was 92 percent effective fuelled another rally on the world's stock markets.

Nevertheless, the small glimmer of hope is not yet enough to eclipse the grim statistics still being recorded all across the globe.

In Italy, the number of confirmed [coronavirus](#) cases passed the symbolic one million mark, while almost 43,000 people have died, official data showed.

'Not out of the woods'

In Britain, the [death toll](#) topped 50,000 after another 595 fatalities recorded in the last 24 hours, government data showed.

"Every death is a tragedy... we're not out of the woods yet," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

And in Spain, the death toll surged over 40,000 with infections passing the 1.4 million mark as the rate of new cases continued to grow, health ministry data showed.

In Gibraltar, an elderly woman living in a care home became the first person to die of COVID-19 there, the government said.

According to the World Health Organization, some 42 "candidate vaccines" are currently undergoing clinical trial, up from 11 in mid-June.

In August, Russia became the first country to register a vaccine, but did so ahead of the large-scale clinical trials that are still under way.

For Sputnik V, some 40,000 volunteers at 29 medical centres are taking part in the third and final phase of testing and overseas trials are also taking place in the United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, Belarus and other countries.

Russia promised that the interim research data are to be published in one of the world's "leading peer-reviewed medical academic journals".

But even when a vaccine is finally launched, it will not necessarily mark the end of the pandemic, many observers warn.

Virus still accelerating

"The recovery may not be linear, but rather unsteady, stop-start and contingent on the pace of vaccine roll-out," cautioned European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde.

"We could still face recurring cycles of accelerating viral spread and tightening restrictions until widespread immunity is achieved," she told a virtual forum on central banking.

In the United States, too, the caseload is soaring—a record 200,000 new infections were registered on Tuesday and another 1,535 people lost their lives in 24 hours.

The virus is also reaching the farthest corners of the earth, with the tiny Pacific Ocean state of Vanuatu reporting its first case, ending its status as one of the few remaining virus-free countries.

And in Europe, which has suffered more than 317,525 deaths from 13,339,600 infections, many countries are struggling with a surging second wave.

Greece, already under lockdown, announced on Wednesday that a curfew would additionally come into effect from Friday in a bid to curb the spread of the virus and ease pressure on its strapped hospitals.

"The situation is extremely critical," said deputy civil protection minister Nikos Hardalias.

Sweden, which has so far refused to follow the path of most other countries in imposing mandatory lockdowns, turned up the rhetoric on Wednesday to try to persuade people to take the situation seriously.

"Everyone must follow the advice and the recommendations," said Prime Minister Stefan Lofven. "The actions of everyone, the negligence of everyone are significant."

In Ukraine, however, nearly 2,000 people protested in Kiev against possible weekend restrictions that officials say may come into force to slow the spread of the virus there.

New EU agency

The European Commission announced on Wednesday that it intended to build a new agency to prepare for similar crises in the future.

While health policy is mainly the responsibility of the bloc's 27 member states, EU Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides said the coronavirus pandemic had shown the need for coordination.

Brussels plans to launch a new agency, the Health Emergency Response Authority (HERA), in 2023, Kyriakides said.

On Tuesday, the EU parliament and member states struck a deal to pass the bloc's multi-annual budget, unblocking 750 billion euros (\$886 billion) in coronavirus recovery funds.

The virus has claimed at least 1,275,113 lives worldwide, according to an AFP tally, with more than 51 million cases registered across the globe.

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