

US, Europe plan vaccination schemes as second virus wave builds

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A volunteer receives a Moderna injection in a clinical trial involving more than 30,000 participants

Plans for vaccination programmes began taking shape in Europe and the United States following recent breakthroughs, but surging coronavirus

caseloads prompted gruelling new restrictions, with Austria taking the unpopular step Tuesday of closing schools and shops.

Global hopes of beating the pandemic were high after US biotech firm Moderna said its vaccine candidate was nearly 95 percent effective in a trial, a week after similar results announced by pharma giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech.

Top US infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci hailed the results, telling AFP that the data exceeded expectations. "The idea that we have a 94.5 percent effective vaccine is stunningly impressive," he said.

Moderna, whose clinical trial involved more than 30,000 participants, expects to have approximately 20 million doses ready to ship in the United States by year-end—with elderly and other at-risk people to be first in line for jabs.

The US Food and Drug Agency may approve both the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines early next month, according to Moncef Slaoui, head of the government's "Operation Warp Speed" vaccine quest.

He said that from January, 25 million people would be vaccinated per month.

France too said it was "getting on the starting blocks" for a vaccination programme to launch in January pending French and EU regulatory approval, budgeting 1.5 billion euros (\$1.8 billion) for the rollout in 2021, according to spokesman Gabriel Attal.

Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel urged the EU not to drag out negotiations to purchase the firm's vaccine, as other nations that have signed deals—Canada, Japan, Israel, Qatar and Britain—will get priority.

Covid-19

World toll on Tuesday November 17 at 1100 GMT

Deaths	New deaths	Cases	New cases
1,328,048	7,810	55,022,353	529,892

New: 24-hour increase on November 16

Hardest-hit countries

	Deaths	New (latest report)	Cases
UNITED STATES	247,229	1,008	11,206,054
BRAZIL	166,014	216	5,876,464
INDIA	130,519	449	8,874,290
MEXICO	98,861	319	1,009,396
UNITED KINGDOM	52,147	213	1,390,681
ITALY	45,733	504	1,205,881
FRANCE	45,054	506	1,991,233
IRAN	42,461	482	788,473
SPAIN	41,253	484	1,496,864
ARGENTINA	35,727	291	1,318,371
PERU	35,271	40	938,268
COLOMBIA	34,223	192	1,205,217

Increases over 24 hours may not tally exactly with previous day's total due to inavailability or late publication of data or corrections made by authorities

Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls



Toll of coronavirus infections and deaths worldwide and in worst-affected countries, as of Nov 17 at 1100 GMT

"It is clear that with a delay this is not going to limit the total amount but it is going to slow down delivery," Bancel told AFP, noting that the US has already reserved 100 million doses.

Moderna is still in negotiations with the European Commission for the sale of 80 million doses of the vaccine, Bancel said.

Meanwhile Russia is pushing ahead with the development of two vaccine candidates, and President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday urged fellow members of the BRICS alliance of major emerging countries to mass produce them.

"It's very important to unite (to get) these products into wide circulation," Putin said during an online summit of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Putin noted that Russia has manufacturing agreements with China and India, which hosts the world's largest vaccine producer, the Serum Institute of India.

Russia announced in August that it had registered Sputnik V—named after the Soviet-era satellite—which it has since said is 92 percent effective. Putin announced a second coronavirus vaccine, EpiVacCorona, last month.

Tear gas in Athens

With widespread availability of any vaccine still far off, restrictions on free movement, gatherings and business were inevitable as the second wave of the coronavirus continued to build.



Tightened restrictions took effect Tuesday in Austria, with schools and shops shut until December 6

Curbs have returned in Europe—often in the face of protests.

In Greece, police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse a demonstration marking the anniversary of a deadly 1973 student uprising, held Tuesday in defiance of a ban imposed because of the pandemic.

In Austria, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz drew a sharp backlash for new measures that shuttered schools and shops until December 6, which Pamela Rendi-Wagner, leader of the opposition Social Democrats, said

reflected a "total loss of control".

"Austria has gone from being a model country to being the bottom of the table in terms of infections," said Rendi-Wagner, herself a doctor and former health minister.

The number of daily infections in the Alpine nation of 8.8 million people grew from 1,000 in early October to 5,984 on Tuesday.

In Europe, coronavirus cases topped 15 million Tuesday, while globally infections have surpassed 55 million with more than 1.3 million deaths, and experts caution the months ahead will be difficult and dangerous.

Italy said it had inspected over 230 retirement and nursing homes and identified 37 with violations, shutting down four of them outright.

The virus tore through the country's care homes during the first wave of the pandemic, with many residents dying before they could be hospitalised and without having been tested.

Bucking the trend in Europe, Russia has not imposed a new nationwide lockdown, even as it reported a record high 442 new coronavirus-related deaths on Tuesday.



Greek police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse a demo staged in defiance of a ban imposed because of the pandemic

US reeling

Infections in the United States, meanwhile, show no sign of relenting after one million new cases in less than a week pushed the total number to 11,206,054 with 247,229 deaths.

The spikes have prompted new curbs in various states, while experts warn families against large gatherings for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday.

As enthusiasm mounts over the encouraging results of vaccine trials,

Fauci, who heads the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, warned it would be crucial to convince people to take the vaccine, particularly in the US, where anti-vaccine sentiment runs high.

"A vaccine with a high degree of efficacy is of no use if nobody gets vaccinated," he said.

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