

German vaccine maker gives hope as US virus deaths top 250,000

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The German maker of a top coronavirus vaccine said on Friday its jab could be delivered as early as December, offering more promising news even as virus deaths in the world's worst affected country, the United States, passed a quarter of a million.

A slew of positive clinical [vaccine](#) trials is building hope for an end to the pandemic that has killed more than 1.3 million worldwide since it first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

But World Health Organisation officials warn any vaccine may not arrive quickly enough to halt a new surge, forcing governments to reimpose the anti-virus restrictions that have upended lives and economies across the globe.

A vaccine made by Germany's BioNTech with pharma giant Pfizer could receive US and European approval before year-end and may even be delivered by December, BioNTech's CEO told AFP.

The BioNTech/Pfizer shot and another one from US firm Moderna have taken the lead in the race for a vaccine, after large-scale trial data this month showed their jabs were around 95 percent effective against COVID-19.

"There is a chance that we can receive approval from the US or Europe or both regions this year still," said BioNTech chief executive Ugur Sahin.

"We may even start delivering the vaccine in December," he said, "if everyone works together very closely".

Echoing the [positive message](#), EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said the bloc could approve both vaccines "as early as the second half of December".

Trials for another vaccine, developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, also show it safely produces a robust immune response in healthy older people, while producing fewer side effects than in [younger people](#), its British maker said on Thursday.

US deaths, restrictions

News of positive steps towards a vaccine though contrasted with grim figures emerging out of the United States, where 250,000 people have now died from the disease.

Overall, the virus has killed at least 1,350,275 people and infected 56 million since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP on Thursday.

The second worst-affected country is Brazil with 167,455 deaths, followed by India with 131,578, Mexico with 99,528 and the United Kingdom with 53,274.

US states and cities are imposing a raft of new restrictions, including home confinement, the closure of indoor dining and a limit on gatherings as cases soar.

New York City on Thursday closed its schools—affecting 1.1 million students—but left gyms and bars open, the opposite of the virus strategy in many European cities where schools have stayed open.

US health authorities cautioned Americans on Thursday against travelling for the Thanksgiving holiday next week, as the coronavirus spreads.

"It's not a requirement," Henry Walke, the senior doctor at the US government's health protection agency, told reporters. "It's a strong recommendation."

'Maximum alert'

In Russia health officials reported more than 23,600 new infections and 463 virus-related deaths in the last 24 hours, both record highs since the start of the country's outbreak.

Japan was also on "maximum alert" after logging a record 2,000 daily infections with nearly 500 in the capital Tokyo alone, though no immediate restrictions were planned.

"We are in a phase where infections are expanding rapidly, we need to be vigilant," said Norio Ohmagari, director of Japan's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, speaking at a meeting to discuss the virus situation in the capital.

But in some parts of Europe, there were signs new restrictions imposed to halt the second wave were taking effect.

New infections in Germany have plateaued since a partial lockdown came into force in early November, officials said, even though the daily number of new coronavirus cases remains too high.

France, too, has seen declines in daily new COVID-19 cases since a second nationwide lockdown began at the end of October.

President Emmanuel Macron and top ministers will discuss easing some restrictions from December 1, though officials warned the country was still far from the end of its lockdown.

The virus and restrictions imposed to halt its spread continue to disrupt businesses, sports and entertainment worldwide.

Face-to-face meetings between the chief negotiators in Brexit talks were suspended on Thursday after a member of the EU team tested positive for [coronavirus](#).

Two weeks after warning about a mutated variant of the virus in minks that could threaten the effectiveness of a vaccine, Denmark said Thursday the strain has likely been eradicated.

Noting no new cases had been detected since September 15, the government said most restrictions in parts of the North Jutland region, home to 280,000 people, would be lifted on Friday.

Denmark was forced to order a nationwide cull of all its 15 to 17 million minks—the animals can catch the virus and also pass it on to humans—to avoid any new mutation of the virus.

Ireland said Thursday that it was planning a nationwide cull of mink on its commercial farms, which are reported to house around 100,000 animals.

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