

Italy offers free virus vaccines, starting with doctors

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Italy will give all its citizens free vaccinations against coronavirus starting with doctors and care home residents once the jabs are approved, its health minister said Wednesday.

The immunisation drive is expected to begin in the spring. Italy will get its vaccines via an EU procurement programme and is waiting for the European Medicines Agency's [green light](#), Roberto Speranza said.

Britain on Wednesday became the first western country to approve a COVID-19 [vaccine](#) for general use, announcing the rollout of a vaccine developed by Germany's BioNTech and its US partner Pfizer from next week.

Meanwhile Europe's medicines regulator has said it will decide by December 29 whether to grant emergency approval to Pfizer-BioNTech's jab, ahead of a rival treatment from Moderna.

The latest timeline suggests Europeans would be lucky to receive the first jabs before the year is over.

Nonetheless, Speranza said: "We can finally see light at the end of the tunnel."

"The vaccine will be distributed to all Italians for free. It will not be obligatory at first. The government will be monitoring how the campaign progresses," he added.

Italy, the first European country to be hit hard by the pandemic early this year, has been battling a new surge in infections in recent months that has taken the total death toll past 56,000.

Shops, restaurants and bars in the worst-affected regions have been shut and a nationwide curfew was imposed, measures that Speranza said had brought infection rates down.

But he said Italians should prepare for restrictions to continue over the Christmas holidays.

"I warn you now: do not mistake the first ray of sunlight for an escape from danger," he said, adding: "If we let down our guard now, the third wave is just around the corner."

Speranza did not give concrete details of new measures that are due to come into force when the previous restrictions expire this week.

'Discouraged'

But he said international travel over the festive season "should be discouraged" and travel between regions would likely be banned—a blow to those hoping to join their relatives in other parts of the country.

All movement between towns is expected to be forbidden on Christmas Day and December 26.

The Italian government is also joining Germany's push for a ban on ski holidays across Europe over Christmas, amid fears resorts could become a major source of [coronavirus](#) infections. But it faces opposition from regional leaders, while Austria has said it would be economically disastrous.

"It will be necessary to avoid potential gatherings in places of tourist attraction linked in particular to skiing activities," Speranza said.

The [health minister](#) said Italy has signed contracts for vaccines from AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, Sanofi, Pfizer, CureVac and Moderna.

Once approval comes, doctors and [health care workers](#) will get the first doses—some 1.4 million people—followed by residents in care homes—just over 570,000 people.

Those aged over 80 will be next in line, followed by those aged between

60 and 79 years old and those suffering from at least one chronic disease.

Vaccines will then be distributed to key workers—teachers, police, prison wardens—before being offered to the [general population](#) at walk-in centres.

Speranza urged all lawmakers in Italy, where campaigners against vaccination are very vocal, to get behind the immunisation push.

"There's no government majority or opposition on this, there are simply Italians," he said.

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