

Swiss stake out slower, more cautious COVID vaccine path

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Prudence in the Swiss context is justified, says Siegrist

While other countries gear up for rapid roll-outs of COVID-19 vaccines, Switzerland is staking out a slower path, prizing caution over speed, according to a leading vaccine expert.

Britain and Russia will both begin mass vaccination this week, while US and European regulators are expected to provide emergency approval for two vaccines very shortly, with millions of doses set to be given by the end of the year.

But in Switzerland, authorities are in no hurry to approve a [vaccine](#). The first few doses not expected to arrive before late January and larger volumes several months after that.

In an interview with AFP Claire-Anne Siegrist, one of Switzerland's leading vaccine experts, said that while rushing was understandable for the worst-hit countries, a more cautious approach was reasonable in the Swiss context.

"As of today, this prudence is justified," said the head of the Geneva University Hospital's vaccine division.

"Switzerland is not in the same catastrophic situation as the United States," the country hardest-hit by the pandemic, she said.

Switzerland, a country of some 8.6 million people, has counted 5,000 deaths from the pandemic, and seems to be slowly getting a second wave of infections under control.

Siegrist, dubbed by Swiss media as the "high priestess" of COVID vaccines, said follow-up from large-scale, final-phase human trials of vaccine candidates would take longer in Switzerland.

'Additional safety precaution'

Unlike the United States, the European Union and others, the wealthy Alpine nation does not have a process for emergency authorisations of vaccines or drugs, "even in a pandemic", she explained.

US and European authorities have said they could give emergency approval once they have two months' worth of data following human trials involving tens of thousands of people, to ensure efficiency and [safety standards](#) are met, and to detect any unexpected side-effects.

But Swissmedic, the Swiss authority in charge of approving new drugs and vaccines, "requires more data for new vaccines", Siegrist said.

Swiss authorities, she said, will stick to their regular rule of waiting for several additional months, "because surprises could still surface, even rarely, after two months."

"When you have four to five months of follow-up, it is an additional safety precaution."

She acknowledged that the Swiss also hoped to learn from the experiences of countries that begin giving the jabs earlier.

"Having a few months more to accumulate data from the countries that will begin vaccinating earlier and to make sure everything goes smoothly seems reasonable, considering the current situation in Switzerland," she said.

Vaccine hesitancy

The 62-year-old vaccine expert said she hoped the more cautious approach, combined with transparency and clarity around the process, would help counter vaccine hesitancy.

She pointed to polls showing that 30 to 50 percent of the Swiss population remain undecided on whether to take a COVID-19 vaccine.

"Their final choice will depend on the quality of the information we can

provide them with and the confidence they have in this information," she said.

Switzerland has reached deals with the makers of three vaccine candidates, BioNTech-Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca, for supply of a total of 13 million doses—once they have been approved for use.

Swiss authorities have said that once a vaccine is approved, they hope to scale up quickly to vaccinate some 70,000 people per day.

"We are not afraid we will not have enough doses in Switzerland," Siegrist said, adding that authorities in the country expect to be able to provide jabs, free of charge, to all those who want them by mid-2021.

But she stressed that many questions remain around how effective the vaccines will prove to be in the long run, and how long the immunity they offer will last.

Even if a large proportion of the population receives a vaccine, it will likely not be enough in the short term to halt the outbreak.

"For 2021, the idea of herd immunity is a myth," she said.

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