

UK gears up for huge vaccination plan watched by the world

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Nurses at the Royal Free Hospital, London, simulate the administration of the Pfizer vaccine to support staff training ahead of the rollout, in London, Friday Dec. 4, 2020. (Yui Mok/Pool Photo via AP)

The coronavirus vaccine developed by American drugmaker Pfizer and

Germany's BioNTech was being sent to hospitals across the U.K. in super-cold containers on Sunday, two days ahead of the kickoff of Britain's biggest-ever immunization program, one being closely watched around the world.

Around 800,000 doses of the [vaccine](#) are expected to be in place for the start of the rollout on Tuesday, a day that British Health Secretary Matt Hancock has reportedly dubbed as "V-Day," a nod to triumphs in World War II.

"Despite the huge complexities, hospitals will kickstart the first phase of the largest scale vaccination campaign in our country's history from Tuesday," said Professor Stephen Powis, NHS England's national medical director. "The first tranche of vaccine deliveries will be landing at hospitals by Monday in readiness."

Last week the U.K. became the first country to authorize the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine for emergency use. In trials, the vaccine was shown to have around 95% efficacy. Vaccinations will be administered starting Tuesday at around 50 hospital hubs in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will also begin their vaccination rollouts the same day.

Governments and health agencies around the world will be monitoring the British vaccination program to note its successes and failures and adjust their own plans accordingly. The United States hopes to start vaccinations later this month. British regulatory authorities are also examining data on vaccines made by Moderna and AstraZeneca-Oxford University.



A nurse at the Royal Free Hospital, simulates the administration of the Pfizer vaccine to support staff training ahead of the rollout, in London, Friday Dec. 4, 2020. (Yui Mok/Pool Photo via AP)

Russia on Saturday began vaccinating thousands of doctors, teachers and others at dozens of centers in Moscow with its Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine, which was approved over the summer after being tested in only a few dozen people.

The excitement in Britain, which has Europe's highest virus-related death toll at more than 61,000, was palpable.

"This coming week will be an historic moment as we begin vaccination against COVID-19," said Hancock.

Patients aged 80 and above who are already attending hospitals as outpatients and those being discharged after a stay in the hospital will be among the first to receive the jab in Britain. Hospitals will also start inviting over 80s in for a vaccine shot and will work with nursing homes to book staff into vaccination clinics. Any appointments not taken up will be offered to those health workers deemed to be at the highest risk of serious illness from COVID-19. Everyone who is vaccinated will need a booster jab 21 days later.



A NHS pharmacy technician at the Royal Free Hospital, simulates the

preparation of the Pfizer vaccine to support staff training ahead of the rollout, in London, Friday Dec. 4, 2020. (Yui Mok/Pool Photo via AP)

Buckingham Palace refused to comment on speculation that Queen Elizabeth II, 94, and her 99-year-old husband, Prince Philip, will be vaccinated within weeks and then make it public, a move that could reassure anyone nervous about getting a vaccination.

"Our goal is totally to protect every member of the population, Her Majesty, of course, as well," Dr. June Raine, chief executive of Britain's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which authorized the vaccine, told the BBC.

The U.K. has secured 40 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which can cover 20 million people. Since the British government will only immunize people over 16, around 55 million people in the U.K. will be eligible.

Now that the first tranche of the vaccine has arrived from Pfizer's manufacturing plant in Belgium, checks are being conducted by a specialist medical logistics company to ensure there was no damage in transit. This could take up to a day.



Nurses at the Royal Free Hospital, simulate the administration of the Pfizer vaccine to support staff training ahead of the rollout, in London, Friday Dec. 4, 2020. (Yui Mok/Pool Photo via AP)

Each box containing the vaccines, which includes five packs of 975 doses, will need to be opened and unpacked manually at specially licensed sites. After that, the vaccines will then be made available to hospitals.

Delivering the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is complicated because it needs to be stored at super-chilled temperatures: about minus 70 degrees

Celsius (minus 94 degrees Fahrenheit). Fortunately, the vaccine is stable at normal refrigerator temperatures, between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius (35.6 to 46.4 F), for a few days, meaning it can be stored locally. After defrosting the vaccine, which takes a few hours, additional time is required to prepare it to be given in a shot.

Public Health England has secured 58 special Twin Guard ultra-low temperature freezers that provide sufficient storage for approximately five million doses. The fridges, which are not portable, each hold around 86,000 doses.



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The vaccine won't just be provided by hospitals. Local doctors' offices

and other local health care centers are being put on standby to start delivering the vaccine, with a small number expected to do so the week of Dec. 14. More medical practices in more parts of the country will be phased in during December and in the coming months.

Vaccination centers treating large numbers of patients in sports areas and conference centers will subsequently emerge when further supplies of the Pfizer vaccine or other vaccines come on stream. Local pharmacies will later be able to offer the jabs as they do with annual influenza shots.

Although nursing home residents top the prioritization list given to the British government by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization, they won't be getting the vaccinations straight away, as the vaccine packs of 975 doses cannot yet be divided.

The NHS hopes that authorities will soon approve a safe way of splitting up the dose packs so the vaccination shots can get to nursing homes during December.

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