EU watchdog tries again on Moderna vaccine

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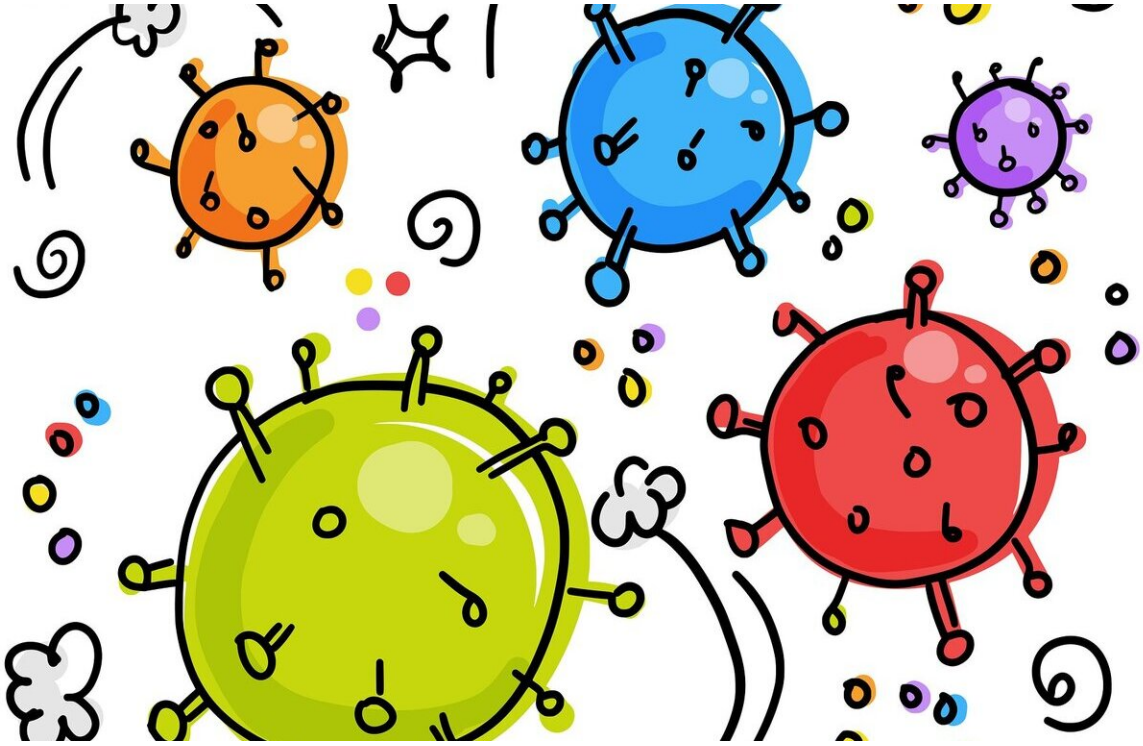

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The EU's drug regulator met for the second time this week on Wednesday to discuss whether to authorise Moderna's coronavirus jab as criticism mounts of the bloc's slow vaccine rollout.

The approval of a second vaccine after Pfizer-BioNTech's got the green light in December would be a shot in the arm for Europe, which is

lagging behind the United States, Britain and Israel.

The Amsterdam-based European Medicines Agency brought forward an initial meeting on Moderna's vaccine to Monday but it proved inconclusive, with the EMA calling for more information.

"The meeting of EMA's human medicines committee to discuss COVID-19 vaccine Moderna has started. We will communicate the outcome," the EMA said on Twitter on Wednesday.

The agency said Tuesday that "our experts are working hard to clarify all outstanding issues with the company".

European Council chief Charles Michel said on Tuesday that the bloc could authorise its second vaccine "in the coming hours", adding that leaders would hold a virtual summit on the health crisis later this month.

"Even if it's not certain, we hope that in the coming hours a second vaccine will be agreed on," Michel told a Lisbon press conference to mark Portugal taking over the rotating EU presidency.

Michel said that delivering vaccines to the EU's almost 450 million people was a "gigantic challenge".

But he insisted that "alongside member states, the European Commission is working night and day to make sure we can increase the number of vaccines available"—while "respecting the independence of the medicines agency".

National capitals have however been pressuring the EMA to issue a green light for the shot from US-based Moderna as other advanced nations such as Britain, the US and Israel press ahead.

The Pfizer-BioNTech product—developed in Germany—is the only vaccine currently authorised for use in the European Union since its fast-track authorisation by the EMA on December 21.

The United States uses it alongside the Moderna vaccine, while Britain as of Monday also started using one by UK pharmaceuticals giant, AstraZeneca.

The EU began vaccinations on December 27 but the pace has been slow, with the Netherlands on Wednesday becoming the final country in the bloc to start an inoculation programme.