

S.Africa revokes ivermectin ban, allows 'controlled' human use

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South Africa's health products regulator on Wednesday approved the "controlled" use of anti-parasitic agent ivermectin on humans, reversing a decision to ban the drug last month over unproven claims that it can treat COVID-19.

Ivermectin is one of a string of generic medications tested as a potential cure for COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

The prophylaxis is mainly used to kill parasites such as [head lice](#) on both animals and people, and has been widely distributed in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s to treat river blindness.

Scientists say there is not yet enough evidence to promote the drug as a remedy for coronavirus, leaving governments undecided over whether or not to limit its consumption amid surging demand.

South Africa—where ivermectin is usually registered for veterinary use but not forbidden for humans —saw its national health products regulator (SAHPRA) block imports of the anti-parasitic in December over "lack of clinical evidence".

The ban sparked outrage among doctors and lobby groups, who accused the government of barring urgently needed research into potential remedies.

SAHPRA back-tracked on Wednesday, announcing plans to "facilitate a

controlled, compassionate access programme for ivermectin" due to rising coronavirus cases.

"We are in the second wave. We are seeing lives being lost and we have many [medical practitioners](#) that have reached out to us," SAHPRA head Boitumelo Semete-Makokotlela said during a virtual press briefing.

"We are in a pandemic with limited options available," she added, noting that the regulator remained concerned over lack of data on the risks and benefits of using [ivermectin](#).

Prominent rights group AfriForum, which teamed up with a group of doctors to file an urgent court application against SAHPRA and the [health ministry](#) this month, said the move was welcome but insufficient.

"SAHPRA's announcement is a step in the right direction, but still does not provide the necessary relief and certainty that we urgently need," AfriForum head of research Bared Uys said in a statement.

"Every day people die while a medicine exists that may probably save their lives."

The case is scheduled to be heard in court next week.

South Africa is grappling with an unprecedented coronavirus resurgence widely attributed to a more infectious, local variant of the virus.

The country is Africa's hardest-hit, with over 1.4 million cases and 41,000 deaths reported to date.

An ambitious vaccination campaign is expected to begin this month, with the aim of inoculating two thirds of the 60 million-strong population by the end of 2021.

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