

UK vaccination drive expands as virus toll nears 100,000

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Health workers prepare the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine inside Salisbury Cathedral in Salisbury, England, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. Salisbury Cathedral opened its doors for the second time as a venue for the Sarum South Primary Care Network

COVID-19 Local Vaccination Service. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

Britain is expanding a coronavirus vaccination program that has seen more than 6 million people get the first of two doses—even as the country's death toll in the pandemic approaches 100,000.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Sunday that three-quarters of the U.K.'s over-80s have received a [vaccine](#) shot. He said three-quarters of nursing home residents have also had their first jab.

Health authorities said 6.35 million doses of vaccine have been administered since injections began last month, including almost 500,000 doses on Saturday, the highest one-day total so far. Health officials aim to give 15 million people, including everyone over 70, a first vaccine shot by Feb. 15, and cover the entire adult population by September.

Britain is inoculating people with two vaccines—one made by U.S. pharma firm Pfizer and German company BioNTech, the other by U.K.-Swedish drugmaker AstraZeneca and Oxford University. It has also authorized a third, developed by Moderna.

It is giving the shots at doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies and vaccination centers set up in conference halls, sports stadiums and other large venues like Salisbury Cathedral. Thirty more locations are opening this week, including a former IKEA store and a museum of industrial history that was used as a set for the TV show "Peaky Blinders."



Pedestrians wearing face masks against the coronavirus pandemic walk in Kensington Gardens as snow falls in London, Sunday, Jan. 24, 2021. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant)

Britain's vaccination campaign is a rare success in a country with Europe's worst confirmed [coronavirus](#) outbreak. The U.K. has recorded 97,939 deaths among people who tested positive, including 610 new deaths reported Sunday.

The U.K. is set within days to become the fifth country in the world to record 100,000 COVID-19 deaths, after the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico—all of which have much larger populations than Britain's 67 million people.

Some health experts have questioned the Conservative government's decision to give the two vaccine doses up to 12 weeks apart, rather than the recommended three weeks, in order to offer as many people as possible their first dose quickly.

AstraZeneca has said it believes a first dose of its vaccine offers protection after 12 weeks but Pfizer says it has not tested the efficacy of its jab after such a long gap.



People walk through Battersea Park, in London, during England's third national lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus, Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021. (Kirsty O'Connor/PA via AP)

The British Medical Association says the government should "urgently review" the policy.

But Anthony Harnden, deputy head of the government-advising Joint Committee on Immunization and Vaccination, defended the policy, saying the U.K. is in a "dire situation."

"Every dose of vaccine we give as a second dose, we'll be denying somebody their first dose at the moment and denying them very good protection," Harnden told Sky News. He said the policy of prioritizing first doses would "save thousands and thousands of lives."

Britain's latest surge is being fueled in part by a new virus variant first identified in southeast England, which scientists believe is more transmissible than the original strain. They also say it may be more lethal, though that evidence is weaker.

The British government has said it may tighten quarantine requirements for people arriving from abroad in an attempt to keep out other new variants discovered in South Africa and Brazil. Already travelers to Britain must self-isolate for 10 days, but enforcement is patchy. Authorities are considering requiring arrivals to stay in quarantine hotels like those set up in Australia and some other countries.



Doctor Claire Chatt prepares the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine inside Salisbury Cathedral in Salisbury, England, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. Salisbury Cathedral opened its doors for the second time as a venue for the Sarum South Primary Care Network COVID-19 Local Vaccination Service. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)



A scooter rider travels over Westminster Bridge in London, Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021 during England's third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. The U.K. is under an indefinite national lockdown to curb the spread of the new variant, with nonessential shops, gyms and hairdressers closed, and people being told to stay at home. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)



Health workers prepare the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine inside Salisbury Cathedral in Salisbury, England, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. Salisbury Cathedral opened its doors for the second time as a venue for the Sarum South Primary Care Network COVID-19 Local Vaccination Service. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)



A cyclist wears a mask as he passes graffiti in London, Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021 during England's third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. The U.K. is under an indefinite national lockdown to curb the spread of the new variant, with nonessential shops, gyms and hairdressers closed, and people being told to stay at home. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)



A woman walks by closed shops, in Waterloo in London, Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021 during England's third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. The U.K. is under an indefinite national lockdown to curb the spread of the new variant, with nonessential shops, gyms and hairdressers closed, and people being told to stay at home. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)



People sit and relax after receiving their Pfizer-BioNTech vaccination at Salisbury Cathedral in Salisbury, England, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. Salisbury Cathedral opened its doors for the second time as a venue for the Sarum South Primary Care Network COVID-19 Local Vaccination Service. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

The U.K. is several weeks into a lockdown to try to slow the spread of the virus. Pubs, restaurants, gyms, entertainment venues and many shops are closed, and people are required to stay largely at home.

The lockdown rules will be reviewed on Feb. 15, but the government says it is too soon to think about easing the restrictions.

"There is early evidence that the lockdown is starting to bring cases down, but we are a long, long, long way from being low enough,"

Hancock said.

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