

UK backs CureVac effort to make vaccine for COVID variants

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Apprentice Nursing's Associate Ellie Bull administers the Astra Zeneca vaccine to a homeless person at the Wellcome Centre in Ilford, east London, Friday, Feb. 5, 2021. The British health service NHS England have started to vaccinate homeless vulnerable people. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

The U.K. government announced Friday that it plans to work with a German biopharmaceutical company to develop vaccines targeting emerging variants of COVID-19 as public health officials call for new tools to keep the virus in check as it mutates.

As part of the deal, Tuebingen, Germany-based CureVac said it would supply the U.K. with 50 million doses of the vaccines if they are approved by regulators and that it would manufacture the shots in Britain. The government didn't say how much it was investing in the project.

The announcement comes as public health officials around the world raise concerns about new virus variants that are more contagious or resistant to existing vaccines. While viruses mutate constantly, most of the changes cause little concern. But scientists are closely tracking these mutations to make sure they quickly identify variants of concern.

"While the vaccines currently being deployed in the U.K. appear to work well against the COVID-19 variants currently dominant in the UK, the virus continues to mutate and it is likely that our vaccines will have to adapt to continue to offer the best possible protection," said Jonathan Van-Tam, England's deputy chief medical officer.

"Being able to create these new vaccines at speed will allow our scientists to keep ahead of the virus as they do every year with the [influenza vaccine](#)."

Earlier this week, drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline said it planned to invest 150 million euros (\$181 million) in CureVac's effort to target new variants of COVID-19 using its messenger RNA technology. CureVac said Friday that its collaboration with the U.K. will support both its work with GSK and the [vaccine](#) candidate it is developing with Bayer that is already in human trials.

The U.K. has aggressively supported the development of potential vaccines as it battles Europe's deadliest COVID-19 outbreak. The government has invested over 300 million pounds (\$410 million) in vaccine development and acquired 407 million doses of seven different vaccines.

CureVac said its collaboration with the British government will help the company quickly identify new variants and design vaccines to combat them. The U.K. is a leader in identifying and tracking new variants, sequencing the genetic code of 10% of positive COVID-19 specimens, compared with about 1% in the U.S.

"One of the biggest challenges we continue to face in combatting COVID-19 is the emergence of multiple variants, each of which poses a potentially significant threat to public health," Dr. Antony Blanc, CureVac's chief commercial officer, said in a statement.

"The U.K. government and its Vaccines Taskforce has been at the forefront of surveillance, vaccine development and delivery of vaccines for deployment during this pandemic."

Authorities in England this week launched house-to-house [coronavirus](#) testing in eight communities in a bid to snuff out a COVID-19 variant first discovered in South Africa before it spreads widely and undermines a nationwide vaccination program.

Public health officials are concerned because the variant contains a mutation of the virus' characteristic spike protein targeted by existing vaccines. The mutation may mean the vaccines offer less protection against the variant.

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