

UK speeds up vaccinations: All adults get 1st jab by July 31

February 21 2021, by Jill Lawless



In this Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021 file photo, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson holds a vial of the Oxford/Astra Zeneca Covid-19 vaccine at a vaccination centre in Cwmbran, south Wales. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (Geoff Caddick/Pool via AP, File)

The British government declared Sunday that every adult in the country should get a first coronavirus vaccine shot by July 31, at least a month earlier than its previous target, as it prepared to set out a "cautious" plan to ease the U.K.'s lockdown.

The previous aim was for all adults to get a jab by September. The new target also calls for everyone 50 and over and those with an underlying health condition to get their first of two [vaccine](#) shots by April 15, rather than the previous date of May 1.

The makers of the two vaccines that Britain is using, Pfizer and AstraZeneca, have both experienced supply problems in Europe. But U.K. Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Sunday that "we now think that we have the supplies" to speed up the [vaccination campaign](#).

The early success of Britain's vaccination effort is welcome good news for a country that has had more than 120,000 [coronavirus](#) deaths, the highest toll in Europe. More than 17.5 million people, a third of U.K. adults, have had at least one vaccine shot since inoculations began on Dec. 8.

Britain is delaying giving second vaccine doses until 12 weeks after the first, rather than three to four weeks, in order to give more people partial protection quickly. The approach has been criticized in some countries—and by Pfizer, which says it does not have any data to support the interval—but it is backed by the U.K. government's scientific advisers.



In this Monday, Jan. 11, 2021 file photo, people wait in line for the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine at the mass vaccination centre in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (AP Photo/Scott Heppell, File)

News of the new vaccine targets came as Prime Minister Boris Johnson met Sunday with senior ministers to finalize a "road map" out of the national lockdown. He plans to announce details in Parliament on Monday.

Faced with a dominant virus variant that scientists say is both more transmissible and more deadly than the original virus, Britain has spent

much of the winter under a tight lockdown. Bars, restaurants, gyms, schools, hair salons and all nonessential shops have been closed; grocery stores, pharmacies and takeout food venues are still open.

The government has stressed that economic and social reopenings will be slow and cautious, with nonessential shopping or outdoor socializing unlikely before April. Many children will go back to school beginning on March 8 and nursing home residents will be able to have one visitor from the same date.

Johnson's Conservative government has been accused of reopening the country too quickly after the first lockdown in the spring. The number of new confirmed cases, hospitalizations and deaths are all declining in February but remain high, and Johnson says his reopening road map will follow "data, not dates."

But he is under pressure from some Conservative lawmakers, who argue that restrictions should be lifted quickly to revive an economy that has been hammered by three lockdowns in the last year.



In this Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021 file photo, Britain's Health Secretary Matt Hancock takes a selfie with the vaccine hub staff during a visit to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, England, to thank volunteers undertaking clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccinations. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (Molly Darlington/Pool via AP, File)

John Edmunds, a member of the government's scientific advisory group, said British hospitals are still treating almost 20,000 coronavirus patients, half the January peak but almost as much as the height of the first surge last spring.

"If we eased off very rapidly now, we would get another surge in hospitalizations" and deaths, he told the BBC.

Edmunds said there is added uncertainty because of new virus variants, including one identified in South Africa that may be more resistant to current vaccines.

Hancock told Sky News that the government would take a "cautious but irreversible approach" to reopening the economy.

Despite the success of Europe's fastest vaccination campaign, the U.K. government has been accused of failing to protect disabled people, who are among the most at-risk from coronavirus.



In this Monday, Jan. 25, 2021 file photo, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson watches a patient receiving a dose of the Oxford AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, during a visit to Barnet FC's ground at the Hive, which is being used as a coronavirus vaccination centre, in London. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (Stefan Rousseau/Pool Photo via AP, File)

The Office for National Statistics has found that 60% of people who died with coronavirus in England in 2020 had a physical or mental disability. But many disabled people, apart from those with "severe or profound" learning disabilities, have not been put in a priority group for vaccination.

Jo Whiley, a well-known BBC radio DJ, on Sunday highlighted the plight of her 53-year-old sister Frances, who has a learning disability. Whiley said her sister contracted the coronavirus in an outbreak at her care home, whose residents had not been vaccinated.

Whiley said her sister had finally been offered a shot of vaccine—but it came too late.

"She was actually called in for her vaccine last night. My mum got a message to say that she could get vaccinated, but it's too late, she's fighting for her life" in the hospital, Whiley told the BBC. "It couldn't be crueller."

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