

In big shift, Germany to give AstraZeneca shots to over 65s

March 4 2021, by Frank Jordans and Kirsten Grieshaber



A package of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine is shown in the state of Brandenburg where the first coronavirus vaccinations are given in doctors' surgeries, in Senftenberg, Germany, Wednesday, March 3, 2021. (Hannibal Hanschke/Pool via AP)

Germany's independent vaccine committee has formally approved giving

the AstraZeneca shot to people aged 65 and over, and recommended waiting 12 weeks between giving the first and second doses, officials said Thursday.

The decision is "good news for older people who are waiting for a vaccination," German Health Minister Jens Spahn said. "They will get vaccinated faster."

The vaccine made by British-Swedish company AstraZeneca is one of three authorized for use in the 27-nation European Union, though it has not yet receive the green light from U.S. regulators.

Several countries, including Germany, initially restricted it to people under 65, or in some cases under 55, citing a lack of data on its effectiveness in older people.

But the publication of new data on its effectiveness, and pressure to speed up the EU's slow vaccine rollout, has prompted authorities across the bloc to revise their stances.

The independent committee, known by its German acronym StiKo, said its decision was based on "intensive analysis and assessment of new study data" from England and Scotland, which it said "for the first time provide robust results on the good effectiveness of the vaccine in higher-age groups already after one dose."

The data published this week from England's mass vaccination program showed that both the AstraZeneca and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines were around 60% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 in people over 70 after just a single dose. The analysis released by Public Health England, which hasn't been peer-reviewed yet, also showed that both vaccines were about 80% effective in preventing hospitalizations among people over 80.



German Health Minister Jens Spahn delivers his speech during a debate of the German Parliament Bundestag about the coronavirus outbreak situation in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

The German panel said its new guidance also suggests waiting 12 weeks between administering the first and second AstraZeneca shots, as studies show this increases the vaccine's effectiveness. Britain, which has had a notably successful vaccination rollout, has been going with the 12-week spacing for vaccine shots since last year.

Finally, StiKo also suggested that people who have recovered from a coronavirus infection should receive a single-dose vaccination no sooner than six months after being diagnosed with COVID-19.

The panel said its previous recommendations in January were based "totally correctly on the then-available data."

Spahn, the health minister, said the new recommendations will be swiftly incorporated in Germany's vaccine rules, which the government announced late Wednesday would be overhauled to get vaccine shots to more people sooner.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel leaves the German Parliament Bundestag after a debate about the coronavirus outbreak situation, in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

Restrictive rules and a rush of deliveries have left Germany sitting on a

stockpile of more than 2 million AstraZeneca doses even as many who want the vaccine can't get the shots.

France, Belgium and Italy already loosened their age restrictions for the AstraZeneca vaccine earlier this week as European nations scramble to confront a looming third spike in COVID-19 cases. The World Health Organization's chief for Europe, Dr. Hans Kluge, said Thursday that new infections rose 9% across Europe in the past week, halting six weeks of declines.

Germany is facing a third spike in infections, fueled by the more contagious variant first detected in Britain, Bavarian Gov. Markus Soeder said Thursday. Five of the counties with the highest rates of infection are in the southern German state, close to the border with the Czech Republic, which currently has one of the worst outbreaks in Europe.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel attends a debate of the German Parliament Bundestag about the coronavirus outbreak situation in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, right, speaks with German Health Minister Jens Spahn during a debate of the German Parliament Bundestag about the coronavirus outbreak situation in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)



A man smokes as he waits for a train at a train station in Frankfurt, Germany, Thursday, March 4, 2021, the day after Germany decided about new coronavirus rules. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)



German Chancellor Angela Merkel attends a debate of the German Parliament Bundestag about the coronavirus outbreak situation in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

Germany's disease control agency reported 11,912 newly confirmed infections in the past day, taking the overall total to 2.47 million. The number of COVID-related deaths rose by 359 to 71,240, the Robert Koch Institute said.

On Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel and the governors of Germany's 16 states agreed to [extend some lockdown measures](#) until March 28, while laying down a roadmap for relaxing rules in areas with low numbers of infections.

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Citation: In big shift, Germany to give AstraZeneca shots to over 65s (2021, March 4) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-03-big-shift-germany-astrazeneca-shots.html>

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