

Europe resumes AstraZeneca jabs, US to hit 100 million vaccines

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Some European countries resumed AstraZeneca vaccinations Friday after an all-clear from EU regulators and the WHO, as US President Joe Biden was set to meet his goal of having 100 million Americans

inoculated weeks ahead of schedule.

Worries that AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine may cause blood clots have seen countries from Venezuela to Indonesia pause its use in recent days, a setback for the drive to vaccinate populations against a virus that has killed nearly 2.7 million people.

Germany and Italy, both of which are attempting to fight off a third wave of the coronavirus, announced they were using the jab again as of Friday after the European Medicines Agency said it was "safe and effective".

World Health Organization vaccine safety experts also said that "available data do not suggest any overall increase in clotting conditions" among vaccinated people.

"I'm a bit anxious of course, but what can you do? We have to do this, and we do it," said 42-year-old teacher Valentina at a vaccine centre at Rome's Termini station.

"On the contrary, the fear was that they would not let us receive it," said Roberto, 58, another teacher.

Other European countries including the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal are also ending their suspensions, while in Asia, Indonesia said it would follow suit.

France locks down

The vaccine was also brought back into use in France on Friday—but just hours later, the national health regulator recommended it should only be given to people aged 55 and over, given the reported blood clots were only seen in younger people.

Prime Minister Jean Castex—who is himself 55—received an AstraZeneca dose on Friday in a bid to reassure citizens that it is safe.

Around a third of France's population will enter a new month-long partial lockdown from Saturday, after the country recorded its highest new caseload in nearly four months, prompting some to flee capital Paris on packed trains.

In neighbouring Germany, infection rates are once again rising exponentially.

Lars Schaade, vice president of the Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases, said there were grim signs of a return to a situation of "many severe cases and deaths, and hospitals that are overwhelmed".

And Switzerland put off lifting some infection control restrictions as it faces its own third wave.

"We are simply trying, for the third wave, to ensure we do not lose control," Health Minister Alain Berset said.

'We're not scared'

After weeks of fast-changing and sometimes confusing messaging from officials, some members of the public remain reluctant to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine.

But in Spain, 22-year-old medical student Florentino Quinteiro said he was not at all worried after receiving a dose last month.

"The population isn't always familiar with the situation, but we're not scared," he said of his colleagues.

"In pharmacology there's always a trade-off between benefit and risk—for example, contraceptives also sometimes cause blood clots," he said.

Denmark, Norway and Sweden are yet to bring the jab back into use, pending further review, while Finland said Friday it would pause vaccinations for at least a week "until there is more information".

AstraZeneca's shot had been billed as a game-changer as it is cheaper and easier to store than some of its rivals, making it more accessible to poorer nations.

It is a vital part of Covax, the global drive to ensure an equitable distribution of vaccines.

As that initiative ramps up, led by the UN and aid groups, an online conference of G7 finance ministers agreed on aid for hard-hit poorer countries via the International Monetary Fund.

A new issue of so-called Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) at the IMF will "boost members' reserves and provide liquidity for vulnerable countries, freeing up resources to pay for crucial needs such as vaccines and food imports," the British finance ministry said in a statement.

Boost for Sputnik V

Use and production of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine has also been ramping up, with the Philippines becoming the latest country to give it the green light Friday, and Indian drugmaker Stelis Biopharma signing on to produce 200 million doses.

And in the United States there was cause for celebration as medics prepared to administer the nation's 100 millionth vaccine dose.

With infection rates falling, there are hopes that the world's worst-hit country is headed for a powerful rebound.

"It is a time for optimism," Biden said in a White House speech. But he also cautioned: "It's not a time for relaxation."

Meanwhile in vaccine front-runner Israel, voters finally came face to face with politicians at public rallies and street markets as the country heads into its fourth general election in two years.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "is talking about vaccines all day" political scientist Gideon Rahat noted.

"It is vaccines, vaccines, vaccines! You can almost think that he vaccinates the population himself."

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