

France sees 'no need' to suspend AstraZeneca vaccine

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France will continue to use AstraZeneca's COVID vaccine, the health minister said Thursday after several European nations halted its use due to concerns over blood clots.

Denmark, Iceland and Norway suspended AstraZeneca vaccinations and Italy halted a batch of the jabs, but Olivier Veran said France's medicines agency had advised him against similar action.

It had urged him to follow the EU drug regulator's ruling that AstraZeneca was still safe to use.

"There is no need to suspend AstraZeneca," Veran told a news conference. "The upside of vaccinations at this stage outweighs the risks."

France is scrambling to boost its vaccination rollout in the hope of avoiding a third lockdown.

Veran said the daily average of new infections appeared stable for France as a whole, but added the figure hid huge regional disparities.

The Ile de France, which includes Paris, the northern region of Hauts de France and the southern Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur were the main hotspots, he said.

Daily numbers of admissions into intensive care in the Paris region were now so high that hospital capacity risks being overrun.

More than 1,000 patients are now in intensive care in the region, a number that could reach 1,500 by the end of March—a "critical level"—and very close to the worst numbers seen during the second wave of COVID, Veran said.

Authorities were therefore preparing to evacuate "dozens or even hundreds" of intensive care patients away from the capital and its suburbs to other regions.

Nationwide there were now more than 4,000 people in [intensive care](#), up from 3,555 at the start of the month.

"The situation is tense and worrying," Veran said. "We do not know when the worst will be over, or how bad it will get."

Meanwhile, the [health ministry](#) said nearly 20,000 pharmacies would join the vaccination drive.

The fire service and the army are also being drafted in larger numbers to help following a call from Prime Minister Jean Castex for "national mobilisation".

France lags behind major European neighbours for shots administered due to a shortage of doses amid complaints about bureaucracy.

Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian had come into contact with an infected person, his ministry announced, meaning he would self-isolate for the next week.

He met counterparts from Germany, Egypt and Jordan on Thursday and held talks with US climate change emissary John Kerry on Wednesday.

Also Thursday, France eased [travel restrictions](#) for seven countries outside the European Union.

The government had from January 31 banned all travel outside the EU without a valid excuse.

But due to the changing pandemic situation, "it will no longer be necessary to prove a compelling reason for travel to or from Australia, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and the United Kingdom," the foreign ministry said.

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