

Germany looks to AstraZeneca shot to boost vaccine rollout

March 8 2021, by Frank Jordans



Bianca Ahlemeier (32), a childminder in home daycare with five children, is vaccinated with AstraZeneca's vaccine by a doctor at the vaccination centre in Koelnmesse, Cologne, Germany, Monday, March 8, 2021. From today on nursery school teachers, child minders, some teachers and police officers, as well as people in workshops for disabled people, will be vaccinated with AstraZeneca's preparation. (Rolf Vennenbernd/dpa/ via AP)

Eager to deliver hundreds of thousands of vaccine doses that have been piling up, Germany has begun ramping up its use of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine after authorities said it could be safely given to people age 65 and over.

The doses have been gathering dust in storage in recent weeks because of German restrictions on who could get the vaccine and misgivings among some who were eligible. Germany has received 2.1 million doses of the AstraZeneca shot so far, but administered just 721,000, according to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control.

Last week, Germany's independent vaccine committee said new data showed the AstraZeneca vaccine was effective in older people too, prompting a swift change of rules by the government, which has come under criticism for its slow vaccination rollout compared to Britain and the United States.

Authorities in Berlin opened a sixth large vaccination center at the disused Tempelhof Airport in the heart of the capital Monday that will administer only the AstraZeneca vaccine. Starting with 200 appointments, operators hope to rapidly scale up to as many as 3,300 shots a day beginning March 23.

Some general practitioners in Berlin will also begin vaccinating people with chronic conditions this week, according to the city's top health official, Dilek Kalayci.



A health worker holds a syringe with the AstraZeneca vaccine against Covid-19 at a new vaccination centre at the former Tempelhof airport in Berlin, Germany, on Monday, March 8, 2021 (Tobias Schwarz / Pool via AP)

Finance Minister Olaf Scholz told public broadcaster ZDF that he expects Germany to be able to administer up to 10 million doses a week by the end of the month. That would be twice as many as the roughly 5 million shots Germany has managed since vaccination started at the end of December.

Around 2.5 million people in Germany—about 3% of the population—have so far received the two shots needed for the Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines.

The push to vaccinate faster comes as Germany takes further steps out

of lockdown this week, with more students returning to school and some businesses, museums and zoos reopening, albeit only for those who booked appointments in advance.

Among the first to get the vaccine at the new Tempelhof site were many health workers, teachers and police officers.

Silvia Firat, who works in elderly care, said she had initial misgivings about the AstraZeneca vaccine after hearing that some had strong reactions to it. But when Firat got an invitation, she chose to go ahead with it, partly to set an example.



A pharmacist takes a swab from a woman's nose in an adjoining room in Hagen, Germany, Monday, March 8, 2021. The free Corona rapid tests for all citizens were initially only offered by a few pharmacies in North Rhine-Westphalia on

the launch day because of many unanswered questions. (Oliver Berg/dpa via AP)

"I can only recommend doing it," the 40-year-old said. "Every injection we get has some side effects, some more, some less."

Germany has seen over 72,000 deaths from COVID-19 since the pandemic began. Its disease control agency reported 5,011 newly confirmed cases overnight and 34 more deaths.

Thomas Mertens, who heads Germany's independent vaccine advisory panel STIKO, insisted that any suggestions the age limit for the AstraZeneca vaccine had been revised due to political pressure were "not correct, absolutely not correct."

Mertens told The Associated Press that his panel had never meant to cast doubt on the vaccine, but rather considered the data that AstraZeneca had originally submitted for people over 65 to be "insufficient."

Additional analyses provided by the company and released by health authorities in England and Scotland prompted STIKO to lift the age limit for the vaccine last week, he said, noting that other countries in Europe had taken a similar approach.



A soldier of the German Armed Forces Bundeswehr stands inside a new vaccination centre at the former Tempelhof airport in Berlin, Germany, before its opening on Monday, March 8, 2021. (Tobias Schwarz / Pool via AP)

The AstraZeneca vaccine has yet to be authorized for use by U.S. regulators.

Germany's minister for families said she was optimistic that the rate of vaccinations in the country will increase steeply soon.

"We will have a completely different discussion in a few weeks," the minister, Franziska Giffey, told the AP. "Not a discussion about a lack

of vaccines, but instead the discussion will be about how we can ensure that all available vaccines are actually used."

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