

Italy under virus curbs again as Dutch, Irish stop AstraZeneca shots

March 15 2021, by Kelly Velasquez, With Afp Bureaus



The Italian government has tightened restrictions across most of the country from March 15, after it recorded a big surge in Covid cases and deaths

Coronavirus restrictions were reimposed across much of Italy on Monday, while Ireland and the Netherlands became the latest countries

to suspend AstraZeneca's Covid-19 shots over blood clot fears despite the firm and the WHO insisting there is no risk.

AstraZeneca is one of just a handful of coronavirus vaccines being rolled out globally—and as one of the cheapest on the market is crucial to ensuring poorer countries have access to the jab.

Despite immunisation programmes gathering pace, surges in infections remain a threat, and Italian authorities reimposed restrictions on three quarters of the country until April 6 to suppress an outbreak fuelled by a Covid-19 variant first detected in Britain.

The streets of central Rome were quiet Monday morning as the new restrictions took hold, which were sure to further bruise businesses already battered by a year of anti-virus measures.

"I didn't expect it. We live from day to day," said barista Ana Cedeno as she prepared coffees for a few passersby.


"We have lost a lot of money, because our customers have no money."

Schools, restaurants, shops and museums were closed from Monday, including in Rome and Milan, with residents told to stay home except for work, health or other essential reasons.

EU tourism plunges

And while France was hoping to avoid another national lockdown, it was facing a hospital crisis with intensive care beds in the Paris region running out.

AstraZeneca vaccine

LABORATORIES	Oxford (United Kingdom) AstraZeneca (UK, Sweden)	
EFFICACY	 82.4%* 60-73%**	Feb 2 study Aged 70+, with single dose
	Efficacy in those over 65 questioned in Europe due to a lack of data, and before completion of further studies One study suggests efficacy is reduced (22%) in tackling moderate Covid-19 cases of South African variant	
TYPE	Viral vector Based on a weakened version of a common cold virus (adenovirus) in chimpanzees, genetically changed	
SIDE EFFECTS	On one patient out of 23,754 during the trials (Dec 2020 study, Lancet) Several European countries have temporarily fully suspended or banned a particular batch due to concerns about patients developing post-jab blood clots (Mar 2021)	
DOSES	2 shots 4-12 weeks apart	
STORAGE TEMPERATURE	2-8°C (refrigeration temperature)	



* Published by Oxford University, efficacy after 2nd dose

** Study conducted by health authorities in England

Sources: AstraZeneca, gov.uk, Oxford University, Lancet, University of Witwatersrand



Factfile on the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine against Covid-19.

Meanwhile, intensive care doctors in Germany issued an urgent appeal

for new restrictions to avoid a third wave as the British variant took hold in the country.

The coronavirus has killed more than 2.6 million people around the world, with much of humanity going through varying levels of Covid-19 restrictions.

It has sparked a global recession not seen in decades, with the hospitality sector especially badly hammered.

New data on Monday showed that tourism in the EU—measured in nights spent in visitor accommodation—plunged by 52 percent last year compared to 2019, an unprecedented drop.

In some parts of the EU, however, there were signs of things easing up.

Nurseries, primary schools, salons and bookstores reopened on Monday in Portugal as it embarked on the first phase of peeling back anti-virus measures.



Authorities in Italy are hoping that strict restrictions and the ongoing vaccination programme will allow a late-spring relaxation of curbs

But the prime minister warned that reopenings must happen gradually.

"We cannot take risks and lose everything," Antonio Costa said on Twitter.

AstraZeneca worries

As countries battle virus surges, health authorities in Italy and France have backed the Covid-19 vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford, as several countries suspended use of the shot over

fears it causes side effects such as blood clots.

Ireland and the Netherlands stopped giving out the shot on Sunday, joining Denmark, Norway and Bulgaria.

But the World Health Organization, Europe's medicines watchdog, AstraZeneca and experts have stressed that the jab is safe and that there is no evidence linking it to the clots.

The AstraZeneca shot forms the bulk of doses being sent to poorer countries under the WHO-backed Covax scheme, which aims to ensure vaccines reach all parts of the world.



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More than 350 million doses of the vaccine have been administered globally, but the majority have so far been given in richer countries, with Israel, the United States and Britain leading the pack.

The United States, the world's worst-hit nation, has ramped up its vaccine campaign in recent days, after President Joe Biden promised a return to some form of normal by Independence day on July 4.

The US gave more than two million shots a day on average last week, according to data from the US Centers for Disease Control.

'It's hard for the poor'

The top US pandemic adviser Anthony Fauci said authorities were considering cutting social distancing rules to three feet (one metre), from the widely accepted six-foot global guideline.

Distancing requirements are a core issue in discussions around the world on reopening schools, with many claiming the six-foot requirement makes it difficult to resume classes without adding portable classrooms or shortening the school day.



Dutch anti-riot police officers react during a demonstration against the government and anti-covid measures at the Malieveld in The Hague on March 14



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Many teachers' unions have also insisted on six-foot distancing.

Remote learning through the internet has been one option, but it has proved difficult to implement in less wealthy nations where many families do not have internet access or devices such as computers, smartphones and tablets.

"The rich have everything they need," said Maria Fe Morillos, a grade 10 student in the Philippines who cannot afford a smartphone.

"It's hard for the poor because we don't have a gadget or the money to buy it."

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