

Spaniards line up for AstraZeneca amid concerns over vaccine

March 24 2021, by Aritz Parra and Joseph Wilson



A health worker holds a vial of the AstraZeneca vaccine to administer, during a mass vaccination campaign at Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday by extending it to adults up to 65 years old. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

Desperate to finally put the coronavirus pandemic behind them, thousands of Spaniards lined up to get shots of AstraZeneca on Wednesday as the European country became the latest to restart use of the vaccine whose credibility has suffered a series of setbacks recently.

Like neighboring countries that had halted use of the vaccine while examining possible adverse effects, Spain's [health officials](#) are now trying to restore confidence in the shot, one of three currently available in the European Union. That is particularly critical at a time when many countries on the continent are struggling to ramp up slow vaccinations while they see infections spike again.

Spain's pivot back to AstraZeneca comes just a day after another blow to its reputation, when American officials said that the British-Swedish drug company [may have included "outdated information"](#) in touting the effectiveness of its COVID-19 vaccine in a U.S. trial.

It was not the first stumble for the shot, which is cheaper and easier to store than many of its rivals' and was therefore expected to be used widely around the world, especially in poorer countries. The company had previously faced questions about its data reporting and most recently more than a dozen European countries suspended use of the shot over reports of rare blood clots in some recipients. The European Medicines Agency said last week that the vaccine [doesn't increase the overall risk of clotting](#).



People queue after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, during a mass vaccination campaign at Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday by extending it to adults up to 65 years old. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

Still, experts fear the repeated negative attention on the vaccine [could undermine confidence](#) in it and even the immunization program overall, just when the coronavirus is again surging on the continent.

As has happened in other countries, some Italian regions have reported no-shows and cancelations of vaccine appointments, yet the phenomenon appears to be uneven. Norway has expressed concern over high levels of rejection of the shot.

But so far, in Spain, it seems the fear of ending up in an intensive care unit—or worse—is trumping any concerns people have about the vaccine.

Belén Ruiz, a 56-year-old who works with disabled children, was one of 5,000 people with an appointment to get a shot Wednesday at Madrid's Wanda Metropolitano Stadium. She said she was a bit anxious as she waited in a long line, in part because she had dealt with blood clots in the past.



A woman receives a dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine, during a mass vaccination campaign at Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday by extending it to adults up to 65 years old. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

"Nobody has put a gun to my head, but I feel half-obligated to take it. At work, I am in constant risk and in contact with people at risk. And there is all this social pressure, even from my colleagues, not to be the only one that refuses the vaccine," said Ruiz, who lost her 88-year-old father to COVID-19 last year.

After halting the use of AstraZeneca for eight days, Spain has a backlog of over 900,000 doses, almost equal to the number of shots of the vaccine it has already administered. Because of concerns about its effectiveness in older people, Spain is only using AstraZeneca on key workers who are under 65. Even that reflects a recent easing; it was originally only authorized for people under 55.

Meanwhile, it has administered 5 million shots of Pfizer-BioNTech and 355,000 of Moderna in older people.



Vials of the AstraZeneca vaccine are pictured during a mass vaccination campaign at Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday by extending it to adults up to 65 years old. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez)

Spanish Health Minister Carolina Darias said that the restart of AstraZeneca comes at the right moment, with numbers back on the rise due to the spread of most contagious virus strains.

"We are facing a decisive moment," Darias said. "All the regions report a good pace of vaccinations and they backed the decision to continue vaccinating straight through the Easter Week holidays."

Spain and other European countries have the luxury of that choice, but they still need AstraZeneca to meet their goals. And many have been falling woefully behind. The latest figures, for instance, show that less than 14% of people in the European Union have had at least one shot, compared to 45% in Britain and 38% in the United States.

In fact, the EU [is moving toward imposing stricter export controls for coronavirus](#) vaccines as it tries to boost the bloc's flagging campaign.



People wait in line for the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, at San Pedro Hospital, in Logrono, northern Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)

On Wednesday, authorities in Spain's northeast Catalonia region said 87% of slots offered were snatched up by 14,000 people, and that many of those who turned them down had signed up for other slots in coming days.

In Italy, Veneto Gov. Luca Zaia said this week that teachers in the northeastern region of 5 million residents made up many of the no-shows, and that some days the cancelations were up to half of all appointments. But he said the phenomenon appears to be easing.

"Objectively, we don't have a significant level of no-shows," Zaia said on Italian television Tuesday.

After reports of some no-shows in recent days in Croatia, which did not stop using AstraZeneca, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic and his health minister stepped forward to get their shots on Wednesday.

In Britain, where AstraZeneca is the backbone of its robust rollout, there are few signs of doubt, and hundreds of shots of the vaccine or the Pfizer-BioNTech one are being delivered every day.



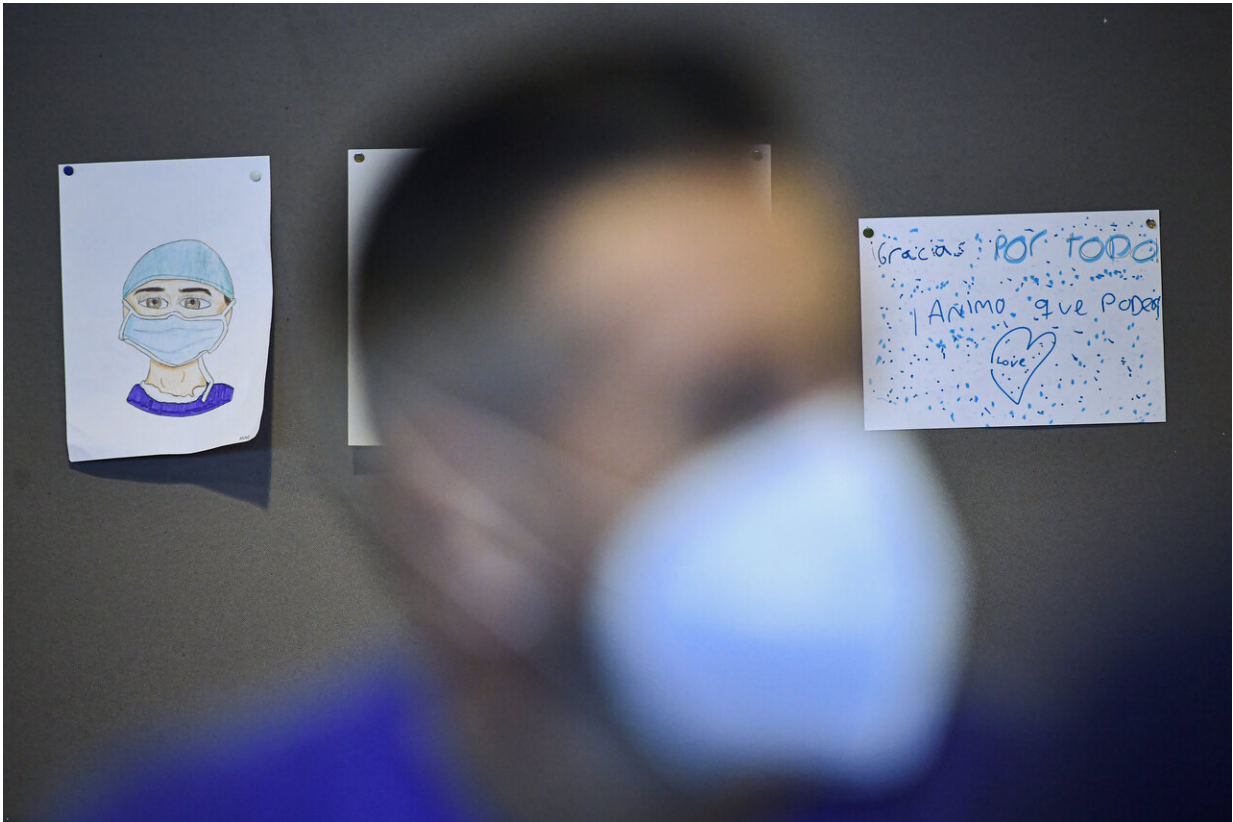
People queue for the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, during a mass vaccination campaign at San Pedro Hospital, in Logrono, northern Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)



A health worker holds a dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, during a mass vaccination campaign at San Pedro Hospital, in Logrono, northern Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)



Javier Crespo after receiving a dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, during a mass vaccination campaign at San Pedro Hospital, in Logrono, northern Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)



A man waits for the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine in pictures supporting health workers, during a mass vaccination campaign at San Pedro Hospital, in Logrono, northern Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)



A woman waits close to an information board showing the use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccination at San Pedro Hospital, in Logrono, northern Spain, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. Spain resumed the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos)



A frontline worker reacts as she receives a shot of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India and provided through the global COVAX initiative, in Machakos, Kenya, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. AstraZeneca's repeated missteps in reporting vaccine data coupled with a blood clot scare could do lasting damage to the credibility of a shot that is the linchpin in the global strategy to stop the coronavirus pandemic, potentially even undermining vaccine confidence more broadly, experts say. (AP Photo/Brian Inganga)



A nurse, left, prepares a shot of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India and provided through the global COVAX initiative, from a portable cold storage box, center, in Machakos, Kenya, Wednesday, March 24, 2021. AstraZeneca's repeated missteps in reporting vaccine data coupled with a blood clot scare could do lasting damage to the credibility of a shot that is the linchpin in the global strategy to stop the coronavirus pandemic, potentially even undermining vaccine confidence more broadly, experts say. (AP Photo/Brian Inganga)

Other countries are even more heavily dependent on AstraZeneca, which is the pillar of the COVAX program aimed at getting vaccines to low- and middle-income countries.

In Machakos, Kenya, Juliana Mwendu, a nurse administering

AstraZeneca shots, said that more patients were coming forward after some jittery days.

"Since morning I have already given (shots to) over 50 people," she said. "So I think after ... they confirmed that the vaccine is okay people are taking it positively now and they are really coming."

But others, like motorcycle taxi driver Steven Musyoka, remain reluctant, noting the concerns elsewhere.

"I am hearing that there is a corona [vaccine](#)," Musyoka said, "but myself and my family will not receive it."

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