

BioNTech boss strikes upbeat note on Europe's vaccine drive

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In this March 27, 2021 file photo a laboratory worker simulates the workflow in a cleanroom of the BioNTech Corona vaccine production in Marburg, Germany, during a media day. Ugur Sahin, BioNTech's chief executive, which developed the first widely approved COVID-19 vaccine with U.S. partner Pfizer, said Europe can achieve 'herd immunity' against the coronavirus within the next four months. (AP Photo/Michael Probst, file)

More than half of Europe's population should have received the coronavirus vaccine in the next two months, allowing governments to consider easing lockdown rules for those who've been immunized, the head of German pharmaceutical company BioNTech said Wednesday.

The European Union has lagged behind Britain and the United States in the race to get shots into arms, but in recent weeks the pace of vaccinations has [picked up significantly](#).

Ugur Sahin, whose company developed the first widely approved shot against COVID-19 with U.S. partner Pfizer, predicted that "50-60% of the population will have received the vaccine" by the end of June, at which point any easing of pandemic restrictions would affect a broad swath of the population.

He cited studies from Israel, which [shares medical data](#) on its vaccination campaign with Pfizer, showing that people who have been immunized rarely fall seriously ill and are significantly less likely to transmit the virus to others.

Sahin suggested Europe could reach herd immunity "in July, latest by August," but cautioned that children would still be among those at risk as the vaccine has so far only been approved for people over 16. A small number of children who fall ill with COVID-19 suffer serious illness or long-term effects.

While the exact threshold required to reach that critical level of immunization remains a matter of debate, experts say a level above 70% [would significantly disrupt transmission](#) of the coronavirus within a population.

BioNTech's vaccine makes up a large share of the doses administered in North America, where it is more commonly known as the Pfizer shot,

and the EU, which is poised to place a massive, multi-year order of 1.8 billion doses in the coming days.

Sahin said data from people who have received the vaccine show that the immune response gets weaker over time, and a third shot will likely be required.



In this Thursday, March 18, 2021 file photo, Ugur Sahin, co-founder of the Mainz-based coronavirus vaccine developer BioNTech, listens during an Axel Springer Award ceremony. Europe can achieve 'herd immunity' against the coronavirus within the next four months, the head of German pharmaceutical company BioNTech, which developed the first widely approved COVID-19 vaccine with U.S. partner Pfizer, said Wednesday. (Bernd von Jutrczenka/dpa via AP, Pool, file)

Studies show the efficacy of the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine declines from 95% to about 91% after six months, he said.

"Accordingly, we need a third shot to get the vaccine protection back up to almost 100% again" Sahin told reporters during a video call.

Vaccine recipients currently receive a second dose three weeks after their first shot, although some countries have longer intervals. Sahin suggested the third should be administered nine to 12 months after the first shot.

"And then I expect it will probably be necessary to get another booster every year or perhaps every 18 months," he said.

Concerns have been raised that existing vaccines might be less effective against new variants of the virus now emerging in different parts of the world.

Sahin said BioNTech has tested its vaccine against more than 30 variants, including the now-dominant one first detected in Britain, and found the shot triggers a good immune response against almost all of them in the lab. In cases where the immune response was weaker, it remained sufficient, he said, without providing exact figures.

Asked about the new variant first detected in India, Sahin said the vaccine's effectiveness against it was still being investigated.

"But the Indian variant has mutations that we have previously investigated and against which our vaccine also works, so I am confident there, too," he said.



In this Dec. 22, 2020 file photo, Ugur Sahin, CEO of Biontech, stands at the companies headquarters in Mainz, Germany. Ugur Sahin, BioNTech's chief executive, which developed the first widely approved COVID-19 vaccine with U.S. partner Pfizer, said Europe can achieve 'herd immunity' against the coronavirus within the next four months. (Andreas Arnold/dpa via AP, File)

"The vaccine is quite cleverly constructed, and the bulwark will hold. I'm convinced of that," Sahin said. "If the bulwark needs to be strengthened again, we'll do so. I'm not worried."

The company is investigating reports of heart inflammation cases in people who received the vaccine in Israel, but so far hasn't seen any data that would indicate a heightened risk, Sahin said. Some 5 million people

in Israel have been vaccinated, primarily with the BioNTech/Pfizer shot, giving it one of the highest coverages in the world.

"We take everything we hear very seriously," Sahin said. "The most important principle in drug development is to do no harm."

BioNTech expects to receive approval in July for its vaccine to be used in China, where it cooperates with local firm Fosun Pharma, he said.

Meanwhile, BioNTech and Pfizer are working with other manufacturers to ramp up production of the mRNA shot as worldwide demand still far outstrips supply.

"When we started 2021, our goal was to produce 1.3 billion doses, and now we've increased that to 3 billion doses," said Sahin, praising pharmaceutical giants such as Novartis, Sanofi and Baxter for joining in the effort.

His company is in talks to create production facilities in Asia, South America and Africa, and may also issue special licenses to other "really competent" manufacturers to boost global supply of the vaccine, Sahin said.

"We don't want to have a low-quality vaccine in Africa," he added, dismissing suggestions that the recipe for it could simply be made freely available.



In this Saturday, Feb. 13, 2021 file photo shows the logo on the BioNTech biotechnology building where production of the COVID-19 vaccine has started, in Marburg, Germany. Ugur Sahin, BioNTech's chief executive, which developed the first widely approved COVID-19 vaccine with U.S. partner Pfizer, said Europe can achieve 'herd immunity' against the coronavirus within the next four months. (AP Photo/Michael Probst, file)

Countering fierce criticism that the European Union had bungled its vaccine procurement process, Sahin said the 27-nation bloc deserved praise for managing to coordinate the simultaneous delivery of the first batches to all member states at the end of December.

"Europeans can be proud that they found a fair solution," he said, adding

that the bloc also exported large numbers of doses elsewhere.

"It doesn't help if Europeans are safe and other countries, where the virus is still raging, keep churning out new variants," he said.

Sahin founded BioNTech in 2008 with his wife, the scientist [Ozlem Tureci](#). Together they decided to [pivot from cancer research](#) to developing a coronavirus vaccine in early 2020 and reached out to Pfizer, which had the necessary expertise to conduct large-scale clinical trials.

The 55-year-old, whose family emigrated from Turkey to Germany when he was 4, told members of Germany's foreign press association VAP that it was "a very nice feeling" to be hearing of more and more people who are able to finally see loved ones again after getting vaccinated with his company's shot.

Sahin said he expects a "new normal" soon, where "one can move about freely and most people have a very good immune protection" against the virus.

Even so, some would either not want to get vaccinated or have a weak immune system "and we have to consider these people too," he said.

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