

EU regulator says AZ clot risk 'very rare' as nations battle virus surges

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The European Medicines Agency (EMA) said Wednesday that blood clots were a "very rare" risk, encouraging countries to continue its use

The EU's medicines regulator said Wednesday that blood clots should be listed as a rare side effect of the AstraZeneca jab but the benefits continue to outweigh risks, as several countries battle fresh virus surges

amid vaccine shortfalls.

A number of nations have suspended the use of AstraZeneca's vaccine for younger populations after it was earlier banned outright in several places over blood clot scares.

The United Kingdom on Wednesday said that people under the age of 30 should choose alternatives to the vaccine, after reporting 19 deaths from clots among people who received the shot.

The back-and-forth over the vaccine comes as countries from Germany to Ukraine and India face new waves of infections and deaths from the virus that has now killed more than 2.8 million people globally.

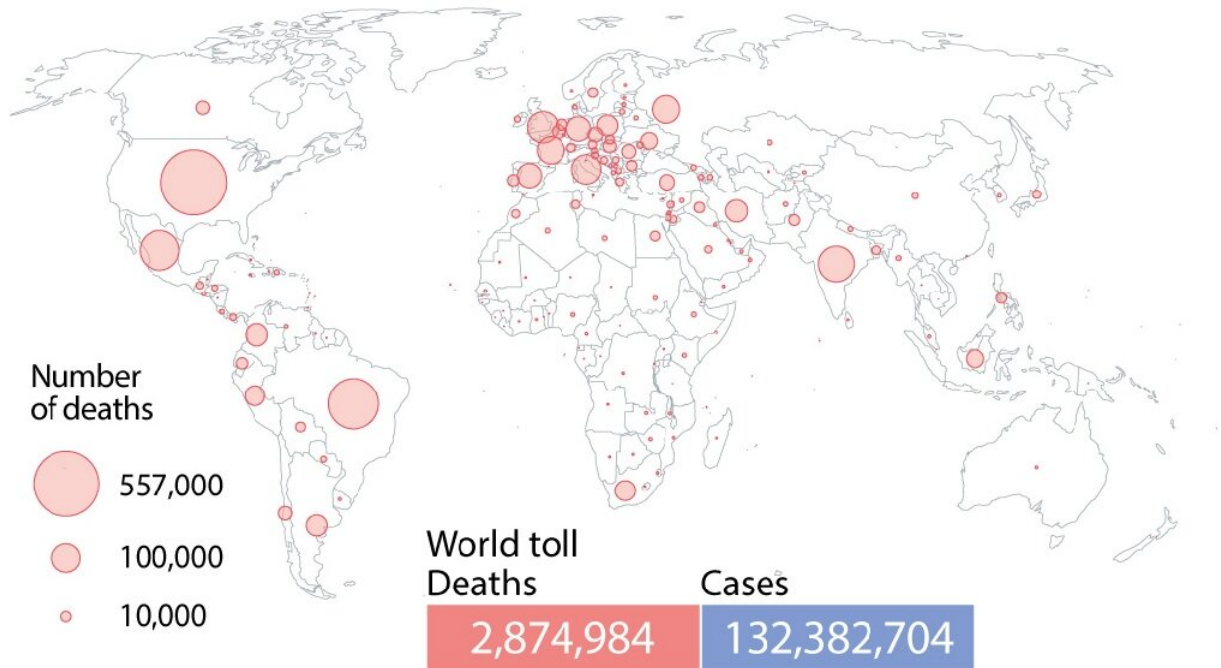
Governments are scrambling to secure much-needed vaccine doses, with Australia the latest nation to complain of shortages that it blamed on EU export controls.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) said Wednesday that blood clots should be listed as a "very rare" side effect, encouraging countries to continue its use.

The announcement came after the EMA examined 86 blood clotting cases, 18 of which were fatal, out of around 25 million people in Europe who received the AstraZeneca vaccine. Most of the cases were in women aged under 60.

Spread of the coronavirus

As of April 7, at 1000 GMT



Source: AFP tall based on official tolls



Spread of the coronavirus

But EMA chief Emer Cooke said no particular risk factor had been identified and the clots may be linked to an immune response to the vaccine.

"Specific risk factors such as age, gender or medical history have not been able to be confirmed, as the rare events are seen in all ages," she told a news conference.

"The benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine in preventing Covid-19 overall outweigh the risk of side effects," she added.

"It is saving lives."

'Plausible but not confirmed'

The World Health Organization's vaccine experts on Wednesday echoed EMA's findings, saying a causal relationship between the vaccine and blood clots was "plausible but is not confirmed".

Canada, France, Germany and the Netherlands are among several countries that are not recommending the shot for younger people.

Britain urged people under 30 to use other vaccines besides AstraZeneca, after reporting 79 blood clots and 19 deaths among 20 million doses given. It did not say how many people had been given the AstraZeneca vaccine.



A firefighter walks outside a Covid-19 vaccination centre in Lille, France

AstraZeneca's vaccine has been administered in at least 111 countries, more than any of its rivals, according to AFP data. It is being used in wealthier countries and poor nations, largely as part of the Covax scheme to ensure equitable access to vaccines.

The controversy surrounding the jab has marred a global vaccine rollout that governments hope will help countries emerge from a pandemic that has ravaged the global economy and subjected much of humanity to some form of confinement.

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed support for a snap lockdown to stem rising cases, after decentralised measures failed to quell outbreaks.

Hard-hit France imposed tighter measures this week, while Ukraine on Wednesday reported record new deaths and hospitalisations after tightening measures in the capital.

"It is no exaggeration to describe the situation as critical," said Kiev mayor Vitali Klitschko, warning that the city's hospitals would run out of beds "very soon".

India, which registered a 24-hour record of almost 116,000 new cases on Wednesday, said it too would rollout tougher curbs with new curfews in place in 20 cities, including the capital New Delhi.



A member of the National Guard inside a Covid-19 vaccination center in New York on April 6, 2021

Amnesty slams hoarding

Australia was facing vaccine woes of its own, after just 700,000 of a contracted 3.8 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine were delivered.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison blamed the EU for the shortages, accusing the bloc of "strict export controls".

"It's not a dispute. It's not a conflict. It's not an argument. It's not a clash. It's just a simple fact."

More than 694 million doses of coronavirus vaccines have been administered globally, according to an AFP tally, with just a handful of countries leading the pack by a wide margin.

Israel has inoculated 61 percent of its people with one dose, while the US has administered 33 percent with a first shot.

Amnesty International said in its annual report that wealthy countries are failing a test of global solidarity by hoarding Covid vaccines.



A medical worker performs a Covid test in Ghaziabad, India on April 3, 2021

"The richest countries have effected a near-monopoly of the world's supply of vaccines, leaving countries with the fewest resources to face the worst health and human rights outcomes," said Amnesty boss Agnes Callamard.

Echoing calls to help hard-hit nations, G20 finance ministers and central bankers agreed to extend a moratorium on debt interest payments for the poorest countries that could lag behind the global recovery from the pandemic.

Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, where around 60 percent of adults have received a first dose, health workers started rolling out the Moderna jab, the third approved after AstraZeneca and Pfizer.

"I'm an unpaid carer for my grandmother so it is very important to me that I get it, so I can care for her properly and safely," said 24-year-old Elle Taylor.

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