

EU to have enough vaccines for 70% of adults 'in July'

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The EU coronavirus vaccine programme will secure enough doses to

immunise 70 percent of adults by the end of July, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said Friday.

The EU chief had previously set a goal of late September, but announced the new target during a visit to a Belgian vaccine plant that is ramping up production.

"I'm confident we will have enough doses to vaccinate 70 percent of all EU adults already in July," von der Leyen said, at a factory producing the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.

Von der Leyen said the European Union would "in the next days" conclude a new contract with the firm—already a mainstay of the European effort—for an additional 1.8 billion doses of second-generation jabs in 2022 and 2023.

The Pfizer vaccine, developed by German partner BioNTech, is expensive compared to some competitors and uses the mRNA technique that can be adapted to future coronavirus variants.

The European Commission's vaccine effort to jointly purchase vaccines for the 27 member states got off to a rocky start, with delivery shortfalls, particularly from UK-based AstraZeneca.

But von der Leyen thanked Pfizer and its subcontractor in Puurs for its "enormous effort" in building up supply.

"So we negotiated together a second contract already early in January, and to accelerate the delivery of vaccine," she said, at a joint news conference with Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla.

"I have outlined the challenges going from vaccinating potentially children and teenagers to having a boost to increase immunity after a

certain amount of time, and mainly to prepare for... variants that might occur.

"And here the technology of mRNA is incredibly agile. So there is a limited amount of time that is needed to, if I may say so, engineer the mRNA in a way that it can adapt to potential escape vaccines."

The European Commission is drawing up plans to take legal action against another pharma giant AstraZeneca over its failure to meet vaccine delivery targets.

Von der Leyen did not address this, but said the question of whether drug companies had proven "reliable partners" had been taken into account in the ongoing contract negotiations.

'On track to exceed'

Pfizer boss Bourla said his company was "really on track to exceed" commitments it had made to the EU and will deliver 250 million doses by the end of the second quarter, a four-fold increase on the first quarter this year.

The visit with von der Leyen to the plant in Belgium underlined Europe's role as a one of the globe's vaccine-producing powerhouses.

The EU's medicines regulator on Friday gave permission for the facility in Puurs to expand its production capacity by 20 percent, with Pfizer aiming to start churning out 100 million doses a month there from May.

Von der Leyen said that so far 150 million doses of vaccine had been delivered across the EU and over 123 million jobs given to people in the bloc.

She said the EU has exported 155 million doses to 87 countries around the world since December—a bid to allay fears that Brussels was closing up shop after introducing export controls in the face of delivery shortfalls.

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