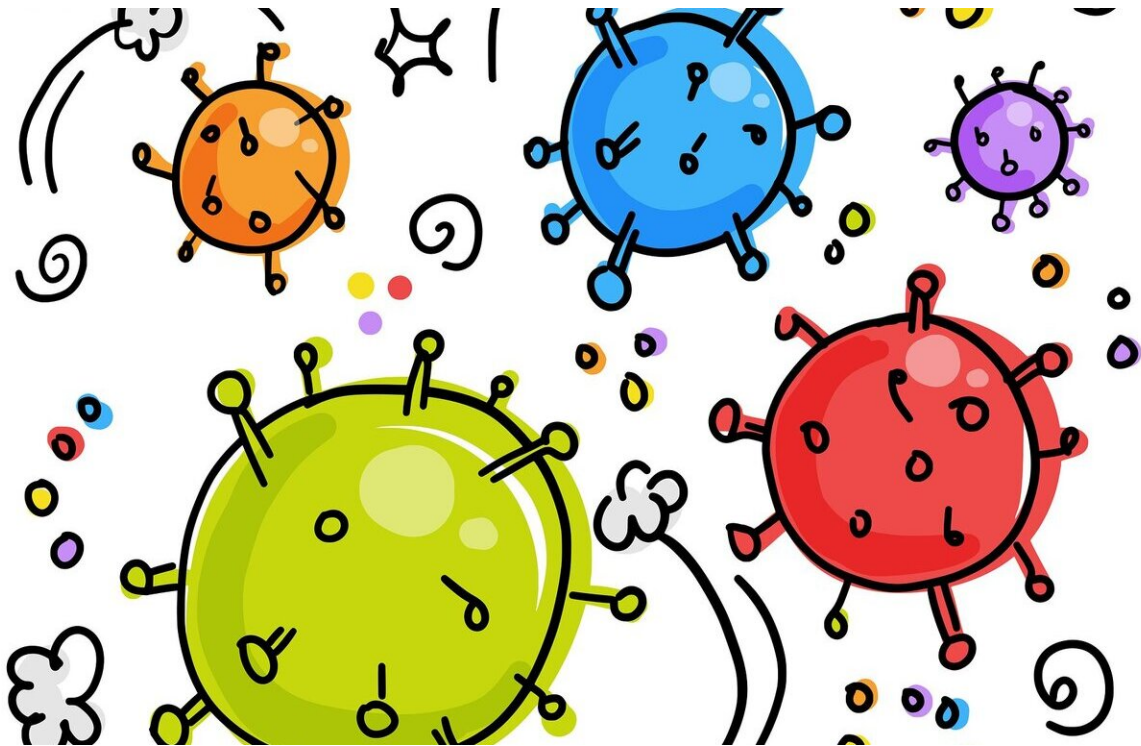


India suffers vaccine shortages as virus surges

April 8 2021



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Vaccination centres in parts of India turned people away on Thursday and large parts of the country reportedly ran low on doses, just as infections rose at their fastest rate since the pandemic began.

A second wave has hit India with a vengeance in recent weeks, with a

record 126,000 new infections in the past 24 hours, more than 10 times rates seen in February. About 1.8 million fresh cases have been reported since March 1.

The government is desperate to avoid a new lockdown but several regions have tightened curbs, with the current epicentre Maharashtra set to enter a weekend shutdown. Tamil Nadu on Thursday was the latest state to announce restrictions.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted after receiving his second shot on Thursday that vaccines are "among the few ways we have to defeat the virus". He urged others to follow his lead by getting vaccinated.

But the world's biggest vaccination programme is reportedly experiencing problems having administered 87 million shots so far in a population of 1.3 billion people.

According to the Times of India, 10 states that are collectively home to more than 700 million people have stocks for only three or four more days including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal.

In Maharashtra, which includes megacity Mumbai, the state health minister warned on Wednesday that supplies would run out in three days unless replenished.

"We are having to tell people that since vaccine supplies have not arrived, they should go home," Rajesh Tope told reporters.

'Very worried'

Major vaccination centres in Mumbai were running out of doses Thursday, with the huge Lokmanya Tilak Municipal General Hospital stopping inoculations altogether.

At a government-run vaccination centre in the Mumbai neighbourhood of Dharavi, India's largest slum, long queues formed.

Afrin Sultana Khan, in charge of the facility, warned it would only be able to vaccinate another 440 people—its daily average—before shutting shop.

"Obviously we are very worried," the doctor told AFP.

Retiree Rajesh Kumar, 68, awaiting his second dose at one of Mumbai's top private hospitals, told AFP his appointment was cancelled at the last minute.

"Any sensible government would have rushed vaccines to Maharashtra by now," he said.

A city official in IT hub Bangalore told AFP is set to run out of vaccines this weekend with a shipment of one million doses five days late.

Sources in Andhra Pradesh state told AFP has doses for only three more days. Two districts have already run out and vaccination centres were turning people away. No new supplies are expected for a week.

'Utterly baseless'

However, federal health minister Harsh Vardhan said late Wednesday that many states were trying to "distract attention from their failures and spread panic among the people".

Allegations of shortages in Maharashtra were "utterly baseless", he said.

"Vaccine supplies are being monitored on a real-time basis, and state governments are being apprised regularly about it."

Ajay Ghai, a senior health official in Uttar Pradesh, said "vaccine supplies are happening on a rolling basis and so is the replenishment. There is no shortage at all."

The head of India's Serum Institute, the world's largest vaccine maker by volume, said on Tuesday that production capacity was "very stressed".

Poorer countries, as well as some rich nations, have relied heavily on Serum for supplies of the AstraZeneca vaccine but last month New Delhi put the brakes on exports to prioritise domestic needs.

"Perhaps shortages and possibility of future shortages are being amplified for political reasons, but it is undeniable that we don't have as many doses as we would ideally want to," public health expert Oommen C. Kurian at the Observer Research Foundation told AFP.

"It is not an India problem; it is a world problem."

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