

BioNTech says 'no evidence' its jabs need adapting for variants

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A colored scanning electron micrograph of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Credit: NIAID

German firm BioNTech said Monday that the COVID-19 vaccine it developed with Pfizer does not require any modifications to work against variants of the virus, as it announced new plans to ramp up

production of the jabs.

"To date, there is no evidence that an adaptation of BioNTech's current COVID-19 vaccine against key identified emerging variants is necessary," the company said in a statement.

Nevertheless, in preparations for a need at some point to make tweaks to its current vaccine, the company said it began tests in March on a "modified, variant-specific version" of its jabs.

"The aim of this study is to explore the regulatory pathway that BioNTech and Pfizer would pursue if SARS-CoV-2 were to change enough to require an updated vaccine," it said.

An assessment is also ongoing on whether a possible third dose could prolong immunity and protect against variants.

BioNTech chief executive Ugur Sahin had said in April that the vaccine works against the Indian variant.

The jab developed by BioNTech/Pfizer was the first to win authorisation in the West, and has since been deployed in dozens of countries worldwide.

It is now supplying more than 90 countries worldwide, and is expecting to ramp up its production to up to three billion doses by the end of the year from 2.5 billion doses expected previously.

'More than enough vaccines'

BioNTech said in a separate statement Monday that it was setting up a production facility in Singapore—its first outside Europe—to produce hundreds of millions of mRNA-vaccines a year.

The island nation will also host the company's Southeast Asia headquarters.

BioNTech's partner Pfizer operates production sites in the United States as well as in Belgium.

In a bid to rapidly raise global production capacities to cope with huge global demand for their COVID vaccine, BioNTech and Pfizer have set out licensing and manufacturing partnerships with other pharmaceutical companies such as Merck, Novartis and Sanofi.

The latest of such cooperations involves a unit of China's Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical, which has agreed a \$200 million joint venture with BioNTech to make coronavirus vaccines.

Fosun said late Sunday that the joint venture firm for manufacturing and commercialising the vaccines will be owned 50 percent by each company.

Both BioNTech and Pfizer have argued that the extension of such cooperation is what would help ensure a wider supply of vaccines, and not a patent waiver as the United States has sought.

Reiterating the argument, Sahin told journalists Monday that BioNTech believes that "together with other vaccines developers, in the next 9 to 12 months there will be more than enough vaccines produced".

"There is absolutely no need for waiving patents," he said.

Amid the huge demand for its vaccines, BioNTech said its first quarter profits soared to 1.1 billion euros (\$1.3 billion), compared to a 53.4 million euros loss in the same period last year.

Revenues reached 2.0 billion euros for the quarter ending March, compared to 27.7 million euros year-on-year.

It added that estimated revenues from COVID vaccines upon delivery of currently signed contracts of around 1.8 billion doses would reach 12.4 billion euros.

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