

France opens Covid jabs for all adults in race against variants

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A medical assistant prepares a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine to be administered to a patient. Credit: Public domain image courtesy of Lisa Ferdinando, U.S. Department of Defense

France on Monday opened up COVID-19 vaccines to all adults, a week before Germany, as Europe races to avoid another wave of infections caused by new virus variants.

So far, 25.4 million people have received a first shot of a vaccine, representing about 38 percent of the population and nearly one in two adults.

Until now, people over 50, workers in professions particularly exposed to the virus and younger adults with underlying health problems were given priority.

With the country just beginning to bounce back from a severe third wave of infections, President Emmanuel Macron's government is keen to quickly expand the vaccine coverage to slow the spread of variants that could spell fresh disaster.

Macron announced on Monday that he and his wife Brigitte had been vaccinated.

"Like Brigitte and I, like 25 million French people have already done, let's get vaccinated! To protect ourselves, to protect our loved ones," tweeted Macron, who contracted COVID in December.

Both France and Germany have over the past week imposed new restrictions on travel from the UK, to curb the spread of the Indian variant blamed for a surge of cases in parts of Britain.

In a severe blow to the French tourism sector, British and other non-EU nationals travelling from the UK to France starting Monday have to provide a "compelling" reason to enter the country.

Germany meanwhile has imposed a two-week quarantine for travellers arriving from the UK.

Declining hesitancy

As the French savour a degree of freedom following the reopening of cafés, restaurants and museums two weeks ago, initially high levels of vaccine hesitancy have begun to subside.

A Cevipof poll conducted in early May showed that 65 percent of adults planned to get vaccinated, up from 48 percent in February.

"I am fully convinced that we are going to see a lot of people getting vaccinated," said Professor Alain Fischer, the immunologist who heads the government's vaccination advisory board.

The government is hoping that the 76.7 million vaccines that it is expecting to receive in June will help it meet demand.

But with only around 500,000 appointments available each day, many people are forced to travel outside their town or even their region to secure highly-coveted Pfizer or Moderna shots.

AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson jabs, which have struggled to find takers, are only open to those aged 55, after rare cases emerged of deadly blood clots in a very small number of younger people.

'Quiet summer'?

After an initially slow start to its immunisation drive in January, when it was criticised as one of Europe's laggards, France is aiming to close the gap with its neighbours.

Britain, which has led the vaccine race in Europe, has given more than 39 million people a first shot and 25 million have had a second dose.

Germany, which was also slow to get off the mark, has also powered up its immunisation drive in recent weeks.

Over 49 million shots of vaccine have been administered in Germany, and that figure is expected to rapidly increase when vaccines are made available to all Germans aged 16 and over from June 7.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has also said vaccines will be offered to children over the age of 12.

In France, a third month-long lockdown ending in April is credited with taming a third wave of infections this spring that flared partly due to the spread of the UK variant.

The number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care fell to under 3,000 at the weekend, the lowest level since January.

The situation emboldened the government to reopen sidewalk cafés and restaurants after seven months on May 19, along with museums, cinemas, theatres and non-essential shops.

The next stage of the loosening of restrictions comes on June 9, when cafés and restaurants will be allowed serve clients indoors and a nationwide 9 pm curfew is pushed back to 11 pm.

"If the fall-off continues between now and June 9... we will have a quiet summer," Arnaud Fontanet, an epidemiologist at the Institut Pasteur in Paris told the Journal du Dimanche weekly.

So far the coronavirus has claimed 109,431 lives in France.

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