Russia launches booster shots amid soaring infections

July 1 2021, by Vladimir Isachenkov

A group of people some of them wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus stand in line to get a coronavirus vaccine at a vaccination point in Gorky Park in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, June 30, 2021. Russia was among the first in the world to announce and deploy a coronavirus vaccine last year, but so far only about 23 million, just over 15% of the population have received at least one vaccine shot. Hampered by widespread vaccine hesitancy and limited production capacity, Russia's vaccination rates have picked up in recent weeks, after authorities in many regions made shots mandatory for employees in certain

sectors. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

Russian health authorities on Thursday launched booster coronavirus vaccinations for people immunized more than six months ago, as the country faces a surge in new infections and deaths.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said he had received a booster shot and urged city residents to follow suit.

"In view of the difficult epidemiological situation today, doctors recommend having booster shots six months after vaccination," Sobyanin said on his blog. "I'm pleading with you not to miss a chance to get additional protection from the virus, which is particularly important amid the spread of a more aggressive delta variant."

Moscow health authorities on Thursday started offering booster shots with the domestically produced, two-shot Sputnik V vaccine and its one-shot Sputnik Light version. Other Russian regions are also starting to offer booster shots.

Health Minister Mikhail Murashko told a government meeting Tuesday that the ministry has issued guidelines allowing those who contracted COVID-19 to get vaccinated six months after they recovered, and those who have been immunized to get booster shots six months after their first vaccination.

Health authorities said the more contagious delta variant of the virus has accounted for the bulk of recent new infections in Moscow and some other regions. The nation's chief sanitary doctor, Anna Popova, confirmed Tuesday that authorities also registered the first infection with the "delta plus" variant, which has an extra mutation, although its

significance is unclear.

A group of people some of them wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus stand in line to get a coronavirus vaccine at a vaccination point in Gorky Park in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, June 30, 2021. Russia was among the first in the world to announce and deploy a coronavirus vaccine last year, but so far only about 23 million, just over 15% of the population have received at least one vaccine shot. Hampered by widespread vaccine hesitancy and limited production capacity, Russia's vaccination rates have picked up in recent weeks, after authorities in many regions made shots mandatory for employees in certain sectors. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova has cited studies indicating

that immunity in those who have recovered from the virus persists for six months on average and winds down gradually after nine to 12 months.
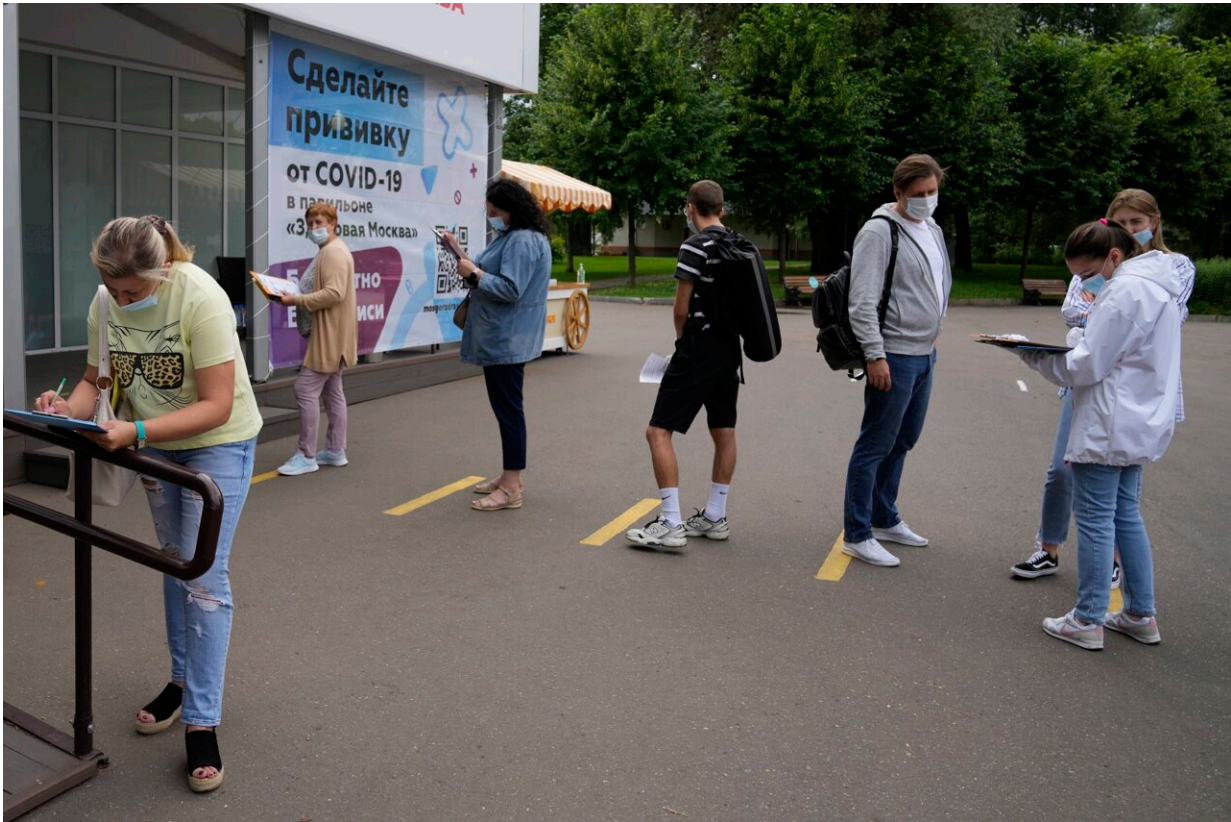
The Health Ministry's guidelines indicated that the booster shots will be rolled out until at least 60% of the population has immunity against COVID-19. Once that goal is reached, booster shots will be delivered once a year.

With most vaccinations, scientists believe people get more protection if there is an extended interval between the shots. There is no evidence that having more vaccines within a short amount of time increases the amount of immune protection. It's also unclear how long protection from COVID-19 vaccines lasts and who will need a booster.

The new guidelines come as infections in Russia are soaring and vaccination rates lag behind those of many other nations.

Russia's state coronavirus task force has been reporting over 20,000 new COVID-19 infections daily since last Thursday, more than double the average in early June. On Thursday, it reported 23,543 new cases and 672 deaths—the highest daily death toll since the start of the pandemic.

Russian officials have blamed the rise in cases on Russians' lax attitude toward taking precautions, the growing prevalence of more infectious variants and vaccine hesitancy. Although Russia was among the first countries to announce and deploy a coronavirus vaccine, just over 23 million people—or 15% of its 146 million population—have received at least one shot.

A group of people some of them wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus stand in line to get a coronavirus vaccine at a vaccination point in Gorky Park in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, June 30, 2021. Russia was among the first in the world to announce and deploy a coronavirus vaccine last year, but so far only about 23 million, just over 15% of the population have received at least one vaccine shot. Hampered by widespread vaccine hesitancy and limited production capacity, Russia's vaccination rates have picked up in recent weeks, after authorities in many regions made shots mandatory for employees in certain sectors. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

St. Petersburg, Russia's second-largest city which is set to host the quarterfinal Euro 2020 match between Spain and Switzerland on Friday, has seen a sharp spike in infections recently.

"There are a lot of soccer fans here, both Russian and those who came from other countries," said local resident Antonina Milenina. "That undoubtedly impacts the situation."

President Vladimir Putin revealed during Wednesday's call-in show that he had received the Sputnik V vaccine earlier this year and stressed the importance of getting vaccinated. The Russian leader, who had received the shots out of the public eye, had previously refused to identify the vaccine he got to avoid offering a competitive advantage to its maker. Sputnik V is the most widespread of the four domestically-designed vaccines in circulation.

Russia's vaccination rates have picked up in recent weeks, after authorities in many regions made shots mandatory for employees in certain sectors, such as government offices, retail, health care, education, restaurants and other services.

While reaffirming his position that vaccinations should be voluntary, Putin emphasized that mandatory inoculation for some workers was based on the law and voiced hope that it could help prevent a nationwide lockdown.

In accordance with new rules effective since Monday, restaurants, bars and cafes in Moscow have only been admitting customers who have been vaccinated, have recovered from COVID-19 in the past six months or can provide a negative test in the previous 72 hours—a measure that helped ramp up the pace of vaccination.

A man speaks to a medical worker as pother people wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus stand in line to get a coronavirus vaccine at a vaccination point in Gorky Park in Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, June 30, 2021. Russia was among the first in the world to announce and deploy a coronavirus vaccine last year, but so far only about 23 million, just over 15% of the population have received at least one vaccine shot. Hampered by widespread vaccine hesitancy and limited production capacity, Russia's vaccination rates have picked up in recent weeks, after authorities in many regions made shots mandatory for employees in certain sectors. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko

"In the past week, there has been an influx of people getting vaccinated," said Natalia Kuzenkova, a doctor who was administering shots at the GUM shopping mall on Red Square. "We have increased our carrying

capacity more than three times."

A spike in vaccination over the past days was quickly followed, however, by reports of vaccine shortages in a number of Russian regions, and some experts have questioned whether Russia will have enough vaccines to go around.

Officials said earlier this week that 36.7 million sets of four domestically-developed coronavirus vaccines have been released into circulation, and 30 more million are expected to be produced in July.

As a new wave of contagion spread, authorities in some regions have started imposing travel restrictions.

From Thursday the southern Krasnodar region, which has a long stretch of the Black Sea coast, required incoming hotel and resort clients to produce a certificate of vaccination, a negative COVID-19 test or a document showing they had been previously sick with the virus.

Starting Aug. 1, only those with proof of vaccination or a document showing recovery from COVID-19 will be allowed into hotels and resorts. The stringent rules have triggered a wave of tour cancellations that has shaken the nation's tourist industry.