

EU signs initial deal with Novavax for COVID vaccine

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The European Commission announced on Wednesday it has signed a preliminary deal to buy up to 200 million doses of a promising

COVID-19 vaccine from US pharmaceutical firm Novavax.

The advance purchase agreement was contingent on the Novavax vaccine being approved by the EU's regulator, the European Medicines Agency, the commission said in a statement.

EU health commissioner Stella Kyriakides said: "Our new agreement with Novavax expands our vaccine portfolio to include one more protein-based vaccine, a platform showing promise in clinical trials."

If approved, the Novavax jab would slot in alongside the EU's COVID-19 vaccines already in use: the one from BioNTech/Pfizer, which forms the backbone of its vaccination rollout; as well as those from AstraZeneca, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson.

The 27-nation European Union, after a faltering start early this year, is now cruising along with its vaccination programmes.

It has fully vaccinated 50.7 percent of its population of 445 million, according to an AFP tally of official national figures.

With the latest deal, it has secured access to up to 4.57 billion doses of COVID vaccines from seven different suppliers.

BioNTech/Pfizer's vaccine is by far the biggest joint purchase by the EU, amounting to more than half that total, 2.4 billion doses.

The portfolio includes vaccines from three pharmaceutical companies that have not received EMA approval at this time: the one from Novavax, and one each from CureVac and GSK-Sanofi that got off to disappointing starts and remain in development.

Unlike the mRNA products from BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna and

Curevac, Novavax's two-jab vaccine relies on a more traditional technique, using proteins to carry fragments of the coronavirus rendered harmless to produce an immune reaction.

This means it does not have to be stored in ultra-low temperatures, potentially giving it a logistical edge.

Option to donate doses

Novavax, a company based in the US state of Maryland, says its vaccine has 90 percent efficacy against COVID-19, based on a North American study. US and EU regulators have not yet given their evaluation of the jab's efficacy.

The deal announced Wednesday would secure the EU a firm purchase of 100 million doses of the Novavax vaccine, with an option for 100 million more, once EMA approval was given. Deliveries would stretch from this year into 2023.

The commission said that, under the contract, member states "will also be able to donate vaccines to lower and middle-income countries or to re-direct them to other European countries".

That suggested that the text contains the liability clauses Brussels insists have to be part of all of its advance purchase agreements, unlike the deals reportedly signed by the United States, for instance.

That liability issue is understood to be a tricky point in EU negotiations with pharmaceutical companies, which frequently want waivers to avoid costly responsibility claims if something goes wrong.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, who previously called mRNA vaccines "central" to the EU's plan to fight COVID, said

the Novavax agreement was "an additional safeguard for the protection of our population".

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