

Israel begins COVID booster shots for over 50s

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Israelis aged 50 and over began receiving vaccine booster shots against the coronavirus Friday as the government steps up its drive to stem spiking infections caused by the Delta variant.

Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, 56, rolled up the sleeve of his black polo shirt before a nurse plunged a syringe into his arm in Kfar Saba's Meir Medical Center north of Tel Aviv.

"I really hope as many people as possible of my age, 50 and older, will get the third vaccination," he said.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett urged elderly Israelis to get vaccines because "you are in mortal danger".

He said that in the past week, 78 people had died of the virus in Israel, and 76 of those people were above the age of 60.

"None of them managed to get the three doses of vaccines," said Bennett.

"There is a deterioration of the vaccine from month to month, and the third dose recharges the body with powerful defence against the Delta variant."

Bennett also urged Israel's four health service providers to expand their hours of operation so that vaccines could be administered "around the clock, 24 hours, seven days," his office said.

"The goal is to double the rate of vaccinations next week," Bennett said, with his office noting that army medics would be deployed to help the civilian vaccination effort.

The government announced Thursday it was offering third shots to people aged over 50, two weeks after launching a campaign to give the elderly booster jabs.

Booster shots

Israel was one of the first countries to launch a vaccination drive in mid-December via an agreement with Pfizer to obtain millions of paid doses in exchange for sharing data on their effectiveness.

The campaign helped to drastically bring down infections, but that trend has since reversed, driven by the spread of the Delta variant in unvaccinated people as well as those whose immunity has waned six months after they got their initial shots.

Israelis rushed to sign up for the booster shots, with the nation's largest health provider, Clalit Health Services, reporting Friday morning it gave 5,000 shots to people aged 50-59.

"We have hope this vaccination campaign will help reduce the impact of the ensuing surge of COVID-19 infections on the severe illness among the groups that are most vulnerable," Ran Balicer, chief innovation officer at Clalit and the chairman of Israel's national expert COVID-19 panel, told AFP.

A 'great service'

The World Health Organization has called for a moratorium on booster

shots until at least the end of September in order to address inequalities in global dose distribution.

But Bennett has said Israel is doing the world a "great service" by administering booster shots and sharing their results.

So far more than 775,000 Israelis have received a third shot, according to the health ministry.

Although the US Food and Drug Administration, which Israel generally follows, has only approved third shots for the immunocompromised, Bennett said experts guided the government's decision in offering it more widely.

Authorities have also encouraged younger Israelis to get vaccinated. Only about a quarter of children aged 12-15 have received both doses.

The drive for more vaccines comes as Israel reimposes some COVID restrictions that had been lifted in early June.

Late last month authorities reintroduced the "Green Pass" that requires proof of vaccination, recovery from COVID or a negative test for entry to most enclosed spaces. The guidelines will apply to children as young as three beginning next week.

Authorities also announced a mandatory seven-day quarantine from next Monday for travellers from nearly all countries, as well as restrictions on gatherings.

Horowitz said he hoped to avert a return to lockdowns the government imposed three times during the pandemic.

"A lockdown is the last resort. It's not a successful solution," he said.

"We don't want to reach this point."

Israel's health ministry said Friday it had recorded 6,083 new cases the previous day.

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