

Third shot: UK to offer COVID booster jabs to over 50s

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Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson attends a media briefing in Downing Street, London, Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021. An expert advisory panel has recommended the U.K. government offer a third dose of COVID-19 vaccine to everyone over age 50 to protect against the coronavirus. Credit: Dan Kitwood/Pool Photo via AP

The U.K. announced Tuesday it will offer a third dose of coronavirus vaccine to everyone over 50 and other vulnerable people to help the country ride out the pandemic through the winter months.

The booster shots, which will be rolled out beginning next week, were approved a day after the Conservative government also backed plans to offer one vaccine dose to children 12 to 15 years old.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization, which advises the government, recommended that booster shots be offered to everyone over 50, health care workers, people with underlying health conditions and those who live with people whose immune systems are compromised. They will be given no earlier than six months after a person received their second dose of vaccine.

Around 30 million people will be eligible for the booster shots, which aim to protect against a modest waning in immunity among those who have received two jabs.

"The result of this vaccination campaign is we have one of the most free societies and one of the most open economies in Europe," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told reporters on Tuesday. "That's why we're now sticking with our strategy."

Although the number of people now contracting COVID-19 is way higher than this time last year—over 30,000 new infections a day—the British government has opted not to re-introduce further virus restrictions for England, as the vaccine drive this year has reduced the number of people requiring treatment for COVID-19 and subsequently dying.



Chief Medical Officer for England Chris Whitty, Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, from left, leaving 10 Downing Street, London, ahead of a COVID-19 media briefing in the Downing Street Briefing Room, Tuesday Sept. 14, 2021. Credit: Victoria Jones/PA via AP

However, Johnson said the government was ready to re-introduce measures over the coming weeks and months if the pressure on hospitals becomes acute. The number of people in U.K. hospitals with COVID-19 stands at around 8,500, way down from the near 40,000 that were hospitalized earlier this year during a catastrophic second wave of the pandemic.

Measures held in reserve include mandatory mask-wearing, vaccine certifications for nightclubs and other large-scale events, though not

pubs, and a requirement for people to work from home.

"When you've got a large proportion, as we have now, with immunity, then smaller changes can make a bigger difference and give us the confidence that we don't have to go back to the lockdowns of the past," Johnson said. "In the meantime, we are confident in the vaccines that have made such a difference to our lives."



From left, Britain's Chief Medical Officer for England Chris Whitty, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance attend a media briefing in Downing Street, London, Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021. An expert advisory panel has recommended the U.K. government offer a third dose of COVID-19 vaccine to everyone over age 50 to protect against the coronavirus. Credit: Dan Kitwood/Pool Photo via AP

The JCVI said the Pfizer vaccine should be the primary choice for booster shots, with a half-dose of Moderna as an alternative. It said these messenger RNA vaccines are more effective as booster shots. The AstraZeneca vaccine shot, which is based on a different technology, will be offered to anyone who can't receive an RNA vaccine for clinical reasons.

The decision to offer booster shots is not one that's being recommended by the World Health Organization, which has asked wealthy nations to delay giving them out until every country has vaccinated at least 40% of their people. Only a few other wealthy countries have recommended their use. In the United States, the FDA is publicly debating booster shots later this week.

England's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, said it's hugely important that developing countries get the jabs they need but pointed to the difficulties in transporting the Pfizer vaccine, which has a relatively short shelf-life and needs to be kept at super-chilled temperatures.



From left, Britain's Chief Medical Officer for England Chris Whitty, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance attend a media briefing in Downing Street, London, Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2021. An expert advisory panel has recommended the U.K. government offer a third dose of COVID-19 vaccine to everyone over age 50 to protect against the coronavirus. Credit: Dan Kitwood/Pool Photo via AP

Appealing to everyone eligible for a vaccine to get one as soon as possible, Whitty said there is a "very substantially smaller" risk of being admitted to a hospital with COVID-19 if someone is vaccinated compared to those who are not. He said someone in their 30s who is unvaccinated is running the same level of risk as someone in their 70s who is vaccinated.

"One of the most depressing things for doctors, including myself, is talking to people who have just chosen not to get vaccinated because it wasn't convenient at that particular moment. And you see them being wheeled down to intensive care, and you know this was a very serious problem as a result of them not being vaccinated," he said.

Whitty also took aim at those who spread misinformation about the vaccines after being asked about comments from rapper Nicki Minaj, saying anyone "peddling untruths" to discourage others from getting the vaccine should be ashamed of themselves.



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Kitwood/Pool Photo via AP



Chief Medical Officer for England Chris Whitty, Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, from left, leaving 10 Downing Street, London, ahead of a COVID-19 media briefing in the Downing Street Briefing Room, Tuesday Sept. 14, 2021. Credit: Victoria Jones/PA via AP



Chair of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) Professor Wei Shen Lim, left, Britain's Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England Jonathan Van-Tam and Chief Executive of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) June Raine, right, attend a media briefing on the latest COVID-19 update at Downing Street, central London, Tuesday Sept. 14, 2021. Credit: Justin Tallis/Pool via AP

On Monday, Minaj sent a series of sometime conflicting tweets to her more than 22 million followers, including an unsubstantiated story regarding her cousin's friend being rendered impotent after being vaccinated. However, she also said that she was "sure" she would end up getting a shot in order to go on tour but wanted to do more research.

When asked about the impotency remark, Whitty sought to stress that

most people are ignoring baseless claims and are getting the vaccines—81.2% of people 16 and older in Britain are fully vaccinated.

"There are a number of myths that fly around, some of which are just clearly ridiculous and some of which are clearly designed just to scare," Whitty said. "That happens to be one of them. That is untrue."

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