

UK approves vaccines for 12-15s, aims to avoid lockdowns

September 13 2021, by Jill Lawless



In this Tuesday, Sept. 7, 2021 file photo, from left, Britain's Health Secretary Sajid Javid, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak attend a media briefing in Downing Street, London. Johnson is set to announce how his government plans to control the coronavirus during the fall and winter. He is hoping vaccinations, rather than restrictions, will keep COVID-19 in check. At a news conference on Tuesday, Johnson is expected to say that mask-wearing, work-from-home advice and social distancing rules that were lifted in July could return if cases climb. Credit: Toby Melville/Pool Photo via AP, File

Britain decided Monday to follow other countries in offering coronavirus vaccines to children 12 and up, as the government gambled that expanded vaccination and mild tweaks to social behavior can avert the need for lockdowns in the winter.

Vaccinations for children and booster shots for at-risk adults are part of a "tool kit" to control COVID-19 infections this fall and winter that Prime Minister Boris Johnson will announce Tuesday at a news conference.

On Monday, the chief medical officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland recommended that children aged 12 to 15 be given a single dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, despite the government's vaccine advisors saying this month that the step would have only marginal health benefits.

Vaccines minister Nadhim Zahawi said the government had accepted the recommendation and would start the vaccinations next week.

Other countries—including the United States, Canada, France and Italy—already offer coronavirus vaccines to children 12 and up, but Britain has held off. It is currently inoculating people 16 and up, almost 90% of those eligible have had at least one vaccine dose.

Earlier this month, Britain's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization said vaccines should be given to 12- to 15-year-olds with underlying health conditions. But it did not back a rollout to healthy children, who are at low risk of serious illness from the virus, saying the direct health benefits were marginal.

However, it said there might be wider societal factors to consider, such

as on education or children acting as sources of transmission to more vulnerable groups.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson listens to apprentice Amy Gray during a visit to a British Gas training academy in Leicestershire, England, Monday, Sept. 13, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Rui Vieira, Pool

The chief medical officers said Monday that vaccination would help limit transmission of the virus in schools and help children's mental health by reducing disruption to education.

England Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said vaccinating kids was "an important, potentially useful additional tool" in the fight against the

virus.

But he said it had not been a "barn-door obvious" decision and it was appropriate "that people have taken longer to get to this and to make sure that we have weighed all the different elements up to get this right."

Children will initially receive a single vaccine dose through their schools. The U.K. has yet to decide on whether to give them a second dose.

Johnson's Conservative government is hoping that widespread vaccinations, rather than restrictions, will keep COVID-19 infections in check during the colder months, when respiratory viruses spread more easily.

The announcement of a new virus road map comes a year after Johnson resisted scientific advice to put the country into lockdown—only to perform a U-turn within weeks as coronavirus cases soared.

Virus cases now are 10 times the rate of a year ago, but vaccines are protecting many Britons from serious illness. Still, the U.K. is recording more than 100 coronavirus deaths a day, and more than 8,000 people are hospitalized with COVID-19. That is less than a quarter of the wintertime peak, but the number is climbing.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson listens to apprentice Amy Gray during a visit to a British Gas training academy in Leicestershire, England, Monday, Sept. 13, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Rui Vieira, Pool

Johnson is expected to say that mask-wearing, work-from-home advice and social distancing rules that were lifted in July could return if cases climb further.

But his Conservative government is resisting tougher measures, unexpectedly shelving a plan to introduce vaccine passports for nightclubs and other crowded venues.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Sunday that the vaccine passes, which have been introduced in many European countries and were due to start

in England at the end of September, were a "huge intrusion into people's lives." He said the government would keep the plan "in reserve" but wouldn't proceed with it right now.

Some experts have argued for vaccine passports as a way to encourage young people to get vaccinated, though others say compelling vaccination, rather than encouraging it, could increase hesitancy. The measure was opposed as a burdensome imposition by many in the entertainment industry, and met political resistance on civil liberties grounds from some Conservative lawmakers and the opposition Liberal Democrats.

The government's vaccine passport decision applies in England. Scotland, which sets its own health policy, plans to introduce the requirement for crowded venues next month.

Johnson also is likely to announce on Tuesday that the government will relinquish some of the emergency powers Parliament gave it after the pandemic began last year, including the authority to shut down businesses and schools, restrict gatherings and detain infectious people.

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