

Gates Foundation invests \$120 mn for Covid pill access

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The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on Wednesday announced an investment of up to \$120 million in an effort to speed up low-income countries' access to a new anti-COVID drug.

The treatment, a pill called molnupiravir developed by US lab Merck, reduces the risk of hospitalization by half in COVID-19 patients who take it in their first few days of infection, the company has said, and could be even more effective at preventing deaths from the virus.

The money from the Gates Foundation would be used to encourage the production of generic forms of the [drug](#) by other companies, especially in India, to which Merck has already granted such licenses.

"This commitment builds on the foundation's ongoing efforts... to increase access to COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and tests by supporting R&D, regulatory work, at-risk manufacturing and product delivery," the foundation said in a statement Wednesday.

The drug, which as a tablet is easier to administer than other existing intravenous treatment options, could offer another important pandemic-fighting opportunity for countries that are still struggling to access enough vaccines for their populations.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is currently reviewing the medication for approval in the United States.

Merck has predicted it will be able to produce enough doses to make 10 million courses of [treatment](#) by the end of the year.

But the roll-out risks following the same trajectory as the anti-COVID vaccines, going almost entirely to [rich countries](#) first, with [low-income countries](#) left scrambling.

"The global supply (of vaccines) was bought up in wealthier countries," Trevor Mundel, president of the Global Health Division at the Gates Foundation, told AFP.

Getting other companies to produce generics could mean there will be more doses to go around, he said.

"Some of them have said 'We can easily do 10 million courses a month if we get up to our high capacity,'" Mundel said.

"But the problem is that they probably won't do that until they see what the demand is and who will be paying for this. So that's what we want to accelerate, we want them to not wait" to start production.

And the Gates Foundation has already helped some of those companies "have a way to make the drug which is much simpler and much more cost effective. And we've given that technology to the generics manufacturers," Mundel said.

The foundation will also fund a communications campaign around the drug, so that it is well-known and will be used appropriately in the countries where it will be distributed.

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