

# UK extends COVID vaccine booster programme to all adults

November 29 2021

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All adults in Britain will now be eligible for a third COVID jab, the government said on Monday, as concern mounted about the spread of the new Omicron variant.

The move, backed by a scientific advisory body and Health Secretary Sajid Javid, comes as ministers scramble to react swiftly to the new variant, which was first detected in South Africa.

Until now, only adults in the UK aged 40 and above were eligible for a booster dose six months after their last.

But that timeframe will now be halved to three months, alongside the programme's expansion to all over-18s, with priority given to older people.

"These measures will protect more people, more quickly and make us better protected as a nation," Javid told MPs.

He noted it was "a huge step up" for Britain's vaccination scheme, which was launched last December, almost doubling the number of people eligible for a booster.

"In this race between the vaccines and the virus, the new variant may have given the virus extra legs," Javid said.

"So our strategy is to buy ourselves time, and to strengthen our defences."

Britain—badly hit by the pandemic with nearly 145,000 deaths and stubbornly high daily infection rates—is one of several countries to have announced cases of the new variant on their soil.

Six cases of the new strain were detected in Scotland on Monday, two of them in the largest city of Glasgow.

Five others were confirmed in England, Javid told parliament, noting he expected "cases to rise over the coming days".

## 'Potential modifications'

Since the Omicron variant was identified and named last week, the UK government—which has responsibility for health policy in England only—has slapped a travel ban on 10 southern African countries, including South Africa.

It has also reintroduced compulsory testing for travellers, and mandatory mask-wearing in shops and public transport in England, as well as self-isolation for contact cases.

But it has stopped short of advising people to work from home in England, in contrast to devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have powers to set health policy.

Home-working guidance has remained there since the summer months.

The health secretary said the ramped-up English measures would be in place for an initial three weeks and then reviewed, with MPs set to vote on the plans on Tuesday.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), which advises UK health departments on immunisation, approved expanding the rollout of the booster jabs of Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech.

At a briefing announcing the changes, it said second vaccine doses would also now be offered to children aged 12 to 15 while severely immunocompromised people should be given a fourth shot as a booster.

"We do not have evidence at the moment that the vaccines being used do not work against the new Omicron strain," said June Raine, head of the medicines regulator which approved the vaccines.

"We're in discussion with vaccine manufacturers and the World Health Organization on potential modifications that may be needed for the current vaccines to be maximally effective against the new variants," she added.

Britain, currently chair of the G7 group of nations, hosted an emergency meeting of health ministers on Monday to discuss the variant.

The ministers said in a joint statement that it was highly transmissible and needs "urgent action".

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