

EU approves new COVID jab to stem Omicron onslaught

December 20 2021, by Jan Hennop With Afp Bureaus



The EU has already signed a deal to buy up to 200 million doses of the two-shot vaccine.

The EU's drug regulator on Monday approved a fifth COVID jab as the US warned of a bleak winter with the Omicron variant spurring new

waves of infections globally.

Since it was first reported in South Africa in November, Omicron has been identified in dozens of countries, dashing hopes that the worst of the pandemic is over.

Despite indications it is not more severe than the Delta variant—still the dominant strain—Omicron has been shown in early data to have higher transmissibility and a worrying resistance to vaccines.

On Monday, the European Medicines Agency's human medicines committee approved Novavax, which uses a more conventional technology that the biotech firm hopes will reduce vaccine hesitancy.

"EMA has recommended granting a conditional marketing authorisation for Novavax's COVID-19 vaccine Nuvaxovid to prevent COVID-19 in people from 18 years of age," it said after an extraordinary meeting at its Amsterdam headquarters.

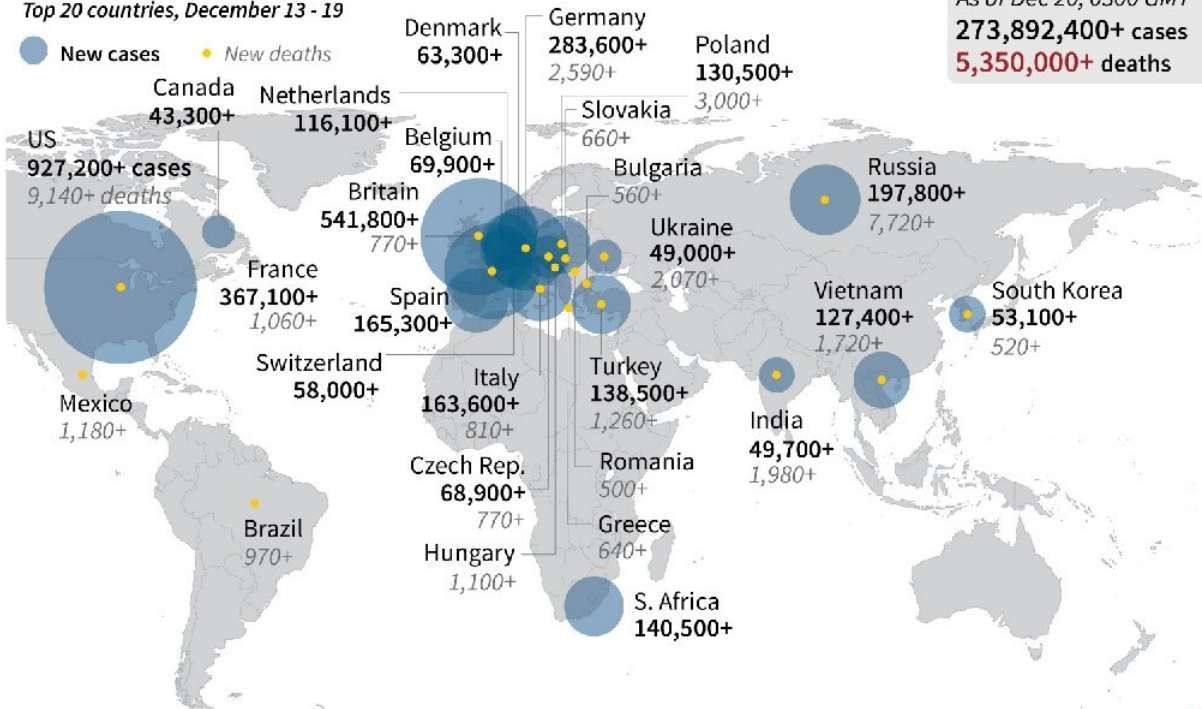
It is the fifth vaccine approved in the bloc after shots from Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, and the EU has already signed a deal to buy up to 200 million doses of the two-shot Novavax vaccine.

The firm says its vaccine showed 90.4 percent efficacy against COVID-19 in a North American trial.

One week of new Covid-19 cases

Top 20 countries, December 13 - 19

● New cases ● New deaths



Global total

As of Dec 20, 0300 GMT

273,892,400+ cases

5,350,000+ deaths

Source: AFP toll



Graphic highlighting 20 countries with the largest number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in the past week.

Governments are scrambling to roll out booster shots to populations, with early data suggesting that a third dose offers increased protection against Omicron.

Moderna said Monday that a full dose of its vaccine given as a booster provides more antibody protection against the variant than currently authorised half-strength injections.

CEO Stephane Bancel called the results "reassuring", adding that the company is continuing to develop an Omicron-specific jab.

WEF off

As the pandemic gathers pace again, familiar restrictions are once again being rolled out as fears loom large.

The World Economic Forum said it was postponing its annual summit of the world's rich and powerful in the Swiss ski resort of Davos scheduled for January 17-21 due to the new variant.

"Despite the meeting's stringent health protocols, the transmissibility of Omicron and its impact on travel and mobility have made deferral necessary," the WEF said Monday.



A person holds a sign reading "No to mandatory vaccination" during a

demonstration against Covid-19 vaccination in Brussels.

And in the US, top pandemic adviser Anthony Fauci meanwhile warned of [tough times](#) ahead with stretched hospitals and over-optimism about the apparent reduced severity of Omicron.

"One thing that's very clear... is (Omicron's) extraordinary capability of spreading," Fauci told NBC News. "It is just... raging through the world."

"Our hospitals, if things look like they're looking now in the next week or two, are going to be very stressed," particularly in areas of the country with low levels of vaccination, Fauci said.

While a little more than 70 percent of the US population has had at least one shot, another 50 million eligible people remain unprotected, Fauci said.

"With Omicron... it is going to be a tough few weeks to months as we get deeper into the winter," he added.

Christmas lockdown

In Germany, which has tightened restrictions notably affecting the unvaccinated—who are barred from most public places—needs fresh measures urgently, a government advisory group said.



An employee moves coffins, some marked with "infection risk" as others have "corona" scrawled in chalk, in the mourning hall of the crematorium in Meissen, eastern Germany.

"If the spread of the Omicron variant in Germany continues as it has done so far, a significant part of the population will fall sick and/or will go into quarantine simultaneously," a report by the 19-member panel said.

The report did not raise the spectre of a new lockdown, but urged "strong reductions in contacts" within the populace in "the coming days".

The Netherlands has imposed a Christmas lockdown and EU chief Ursula von der Leyen has warned that the Omicron variant could be

dominant in Europe by mid-January.

Israel's health ministry recommended banning nationals from travelling to the United States, and added several European countries to its COVID "red list".

One of the main problems in the fight against the pandemic is the yawning chasm in vaccinations between developed and [poorer countries](#), notably in Africa, the world's poorest continent.

Meanwhile Spanish tennis star Rafael Nadal, who was expected to play in the Australian Open next month, said Monday he had tested positive for COVID-19 and was isolating.

"As a consequence of the situation, I have to have total flexibility with my calendar and I will analyse my options depending on my evolution," he added.

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