EU watchdog says 'no answer' if Omicron-specific jab needed

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There is "no answer yet" on whether vaccine makers will have to adapt their COVID shots to counter the rapidly-spreading Omicron variant, Europe's medicines watchdog chief said on Tuesday.

The highly-mutated variant, now present in dozens of countries, appears to be more contagious than previous strains and is driving new waves of infections globally.

Scientists are also examining whether it is more resistant to vaccines than previous strains.

But the head of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) said it was too soon to say whether an Omicron-specific vaccine was needed.

"There's no answer yet on whether we will need an adaptive vaccine with a different composition to tackle this (Omicron) or any other variants," Emer Cooke said.

"We need to see more data on the impact of the variant on the effectiveness of the approved vaccines as well as to gather further evidence," she told a press conference.

That included the current effectiveness of vaccines to prevent mild and severe disease, as well as hospitalisation and death, she said.

Marco Cavaleri, the EMA's vaccine strategy chief, added that booster shots of current vaccines seemingly "provided good cross neutralisation" of coronavirus variants.

But he cautioned that a few more weeks were needed "before really we have the full picture around what we can expect in the future".

"For now we have to be prudent but still, we will have to start thinking about developing vaccines on the variants such Omicron so that in case it turns out that we really need to move into a new vaccination (campaign) using a variant vaccine, we will be prepared," he said.

'More tools'

Cooke said that with five vaccines and six medicines available in the EU to treat COVID-19, "we are in a much stronger position than last year".

"We have many more tools at our disposal," she said.

Vaccine production too has scaled up considerably over the last year, the Amsterdam-based agency's chief said, with almost one billion doses pushed out within the EU over the last year.

Makers now have the capacity to produce some 300 million doses each month, Cooke said.

"Capacity has gone up at least tenfold. This upward trend can and must continue," she said.

The European Union authorised the use of the first of five COVID shots exactly a year ago, now available in the 27-nation bloc, along with several treatments.

The European Commission on Monday authorised a vaccine made by US-based Novavax as its fifth official jab, hours after the EMA gave the shot the thumbs up.

Officials hope the vaccine, made from a more conventional technology than the others, will help persuade those hesitant about vaccination to come forward.

The Novavax vaccine now sits alongside the EU's other authorised COVID jabs, from BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson.

Called Nuvaxovid, the Novavax offering is a vaccine based on so-called protein subunit technology which is tried and tested, having been used for decades to vaccinate people against diseases, including hepatitis B and whooping cough.

Unlike mRNA vaccines produced by BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna, Nuvaxovid does not need to be stored in ultra-low temperatures, giving it a logistical advantage in difficult-to-access regions.