

# EU chief calls for debate on making COVID-19 jabs mandatory

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The chief of the European Union's executive arm said Wednesday that EU nations should consider making COVID-19 vaccinations mandatory because too many people still refuse to get shots voluntarily.

The EU-wide vaccination rate stands at 66%, and unexpectedly high case surges in much of the 27-nation bloc has led many member countries to

renew mask and testing requirements, and to take other steps to curb infections.

"It is understandable and appropriate to lead this discussion now - how we can encourage and potentially think about mandatory vaccination within the European Union," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

Since health policy remains a national prerogative in the EU, and making jabs mandatory remains a highly controversial issue, von der Leyen's remarks stood out.

"One-third of the European population is not vaccinated. These are 150 million people. This is a lot," she told reporters.

"The lifesaving vaccines are not being used adequately everywhere," she continued. "This is an enormous health cost coming along."

German Chancellor-designate Olaf Scholz said he would back a proposal to mandate coronavirus vaccines for all next year.

EU nations so far have taken different approaches to the issue. Austria pledged to mandate vaccines for all residents beginning Feb. 1. Starting in mid-January, Greece plans to fine people age 60 and up 100 euros per month (\$113), if they don't get vaccinated.

"The data is irrefutable: 9 out of 10 Greeks who lose their lives (to COVID-19) are over the age of 60 and more than 8 out of 10 of the people (who die) are unvaccinated," Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told parliament.

Slovakia, on the hand, is considering paying people in that age group 500 euros (\$567) to get vaccinated.

The EU's 27 health ministers are scheduled to assess the emergence of the omicron variant of the coronavirus on Tuesday. Any recommendations they come up with would be put to the leaders of member nations during a regularly scheduled Dec. 16 summit.

An emergency summit on the omicron variant first detected in Southern Africa had been discussed for days, but it was tough to find a time slot for all the leaders. Much remains unknown about the new variant, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart the vaccine.

As of Wednesday, there were 59 confirmed cases involving omicron in 11 EU nations, an increase of 15 since Tuesday. The Netherlands has found the most cases so far with 16, and the majority involved a history of travel to Africa, according to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control.

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