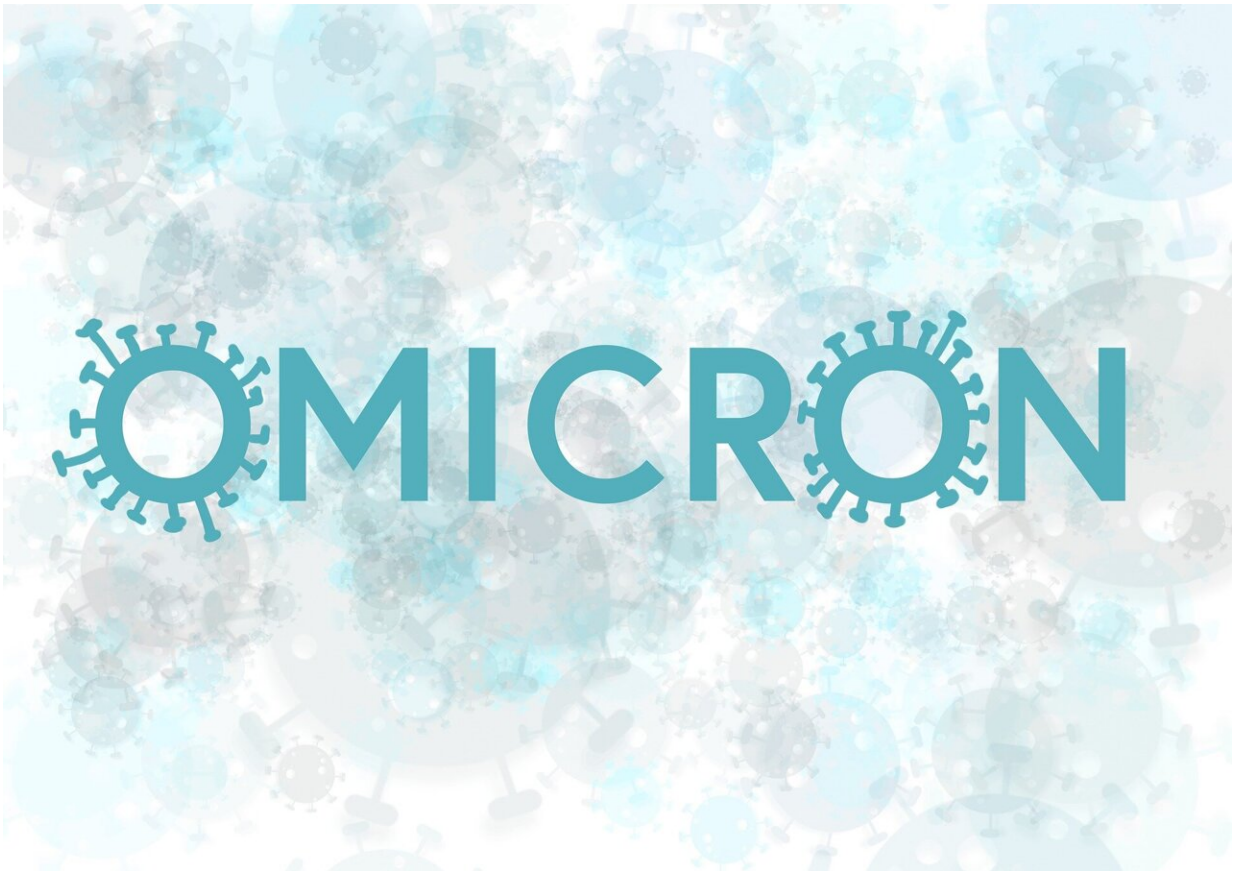


S.Africa okays COVID vaccine boosters for adults

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South Africa on Wednesday approved Pfizer's coronavirus booster shots for over-18s, as the Omicron variant dominates rising new infections.

The South African Health Products Authority said in a statement that it was authorising a third vaccine dose "in individuals aged 18 years and older, to be administered at least six months after the second dose".

Severely immuno-compromised children aged between 12 and 17 years can be given a third shot at least 28 days after their second dose, it added.

The statement came hours after BioNTech and Pfizer announced that two doses of their vaccine may not be enough to protect against the highly-mutating Omicron variant which is causing global concern that it can transmit faster than previous strains.

In preliminary results released on Wednesday, the pharmaceutical companies stressed their jab "is still effective in preventing COVID-19, also against Omicron" after a third shot.

Early results from a small study in South Africa suggested there was up to a 40-fold drop in the ability of the antibodies from the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to neutralise Omicron, compared to the earlier Beta variant of coronavirus.

With a cumulative tally of 3,071,064 detected infections and 90,038 deaths, COVID has hit South Africa harder than any other country on the continent.

The number of new cases shot to 19,842 on Thursday, up from 13,147 the previous day.

One of South Africa's largest groups of private hospitals, Netcare said patients admitted with the Omicron variant have shown much milder symptoms than earlier variants.

"Their symptoms are far milder than anything we experienced during the first three waves," Netcare CEO Richard Friedland, said in a statement.

Of the hundreds of people diagnosed with COVID at their health facilities, "virtually all patients have presented with mild to moderate flu-like symptoms, including a blocked or runny nose, headache and a scratchy or sore throat" the company said in a statement.

Around 90 percent of COVID-19 patients admitted in its hospitals require no oxygen therapy.

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