

Russia offering jabs to children aged 12-17 as cases soar

January 26 2022, by Dasha Litvinova



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Russia on Wednesday expanded a domestically developed coronavirus vaccine for children aged 12-17 to include more regions, amid the country's biggest infection surge yet due to the spread of the highly

contagious omicron variant.

Earlier this week, free shots of Sputnik M—a version of the Sputnik V vaccine that contains a smaller dose—became available to that age group in a number of areas spanning from the Moscow region surrounding the capital to the Urals to Siberia and the far east.

On Wednesday, the jab became available to teenagers in Volgograd, Astrakhan and Kursk. In Moscow, the vaccination campaign will start in the coming days, Deputy Mayor Anastasia Rakova told reporters on Wednesday.

Those under the age of 15 need parental consent for the shot, while those aged 15-17 can make the decision themselves, authorities said.

Russia in recent weeks has faced an unprecedented surge of coronavirus infections, with the number of daily confirmed cases increasing five-fold between Jan. 10, when about 15,000 new infections were reported, and Wednesday, when officials tallied 74,692—another all-time high in the pandemic.

Moscow, the outlying region and St. Petersburg are hit the hardest by the surge and account for about half of all daily new infections.

Officials in Moscow and St. Petersburg on Wednesday sounded the alarm about a sharp spike of COVID-19 infections in children.

Moscow city health department said the number of children infected with the virus increased 14 times in the past two weeks, from 2,000 a week to 28,000. The number of hospitalizations of children with COVID-19 grew ten-fold, the department said in a statement, and in half of those cases children contracted the virus while undergoing elective hospital care for other conditions.

In light of those findings, [city officials](#) decided to halt elective hospital care for [children](#) for three weeks.

In St. Petersburg, the [infection](#) rate among those under 17 has grown eight-fold over the past week, local officials said. Starting Friday, minors in Russia's second largest city will be barred from attending any extra-curricular classes or activities.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday said there were no plans to introduce remote learning nationwide.

Russian authorities have generally avoided imposing any major restrictions to stem the surge, saying the health system has been coping with the influx of patients.

Furthermore, earlier this month parliament indefinitely postponed introducing restrictions for the unvaccinated that would have proven unpopular among vaccine-hesitant Russians. And this week health officials cut the required isolation period for those who came in contact with COVID-19 patients from 14 days to seven without offering any explanation for the move.

In all, Russia's state coronavirus task force has reported more than 11.3 million confirmed cases and 328,105 deaths, by far the largest death toll in Europe. Russia's state statistics agency, which uses broader counting criteria, puts the death toll much higher, saying the overall number of virus-linked deaths between April 2020 and October 2021 was over 625,000.

Just about half of Russia's 146 million people have been fully vaccinated, even though Russia boasted about being the first country in the world to approve and roll out a domestically developed coronavirus vaccine.

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Citation: Russia offering jabs to children aged 12-17 as cases soar (2022, January 26) retrieved 5 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-russia-jabs-children-aged-.html>

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