

S. Korea approves Pfizer's COVID vaccine for ages 5-11

February 23 2022, by Kim Tong-Hyung



A medical worker uses a loud speaker to give advice to people as they wait for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022. South Korean health officials on Wednesday approved Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine for the country's unvaccinated younger children, expanding its immunization program in the face of a massive omicron outbreak that is beginning to drive up hospitalizations and deaths. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

South Korean health officials on Wednesday approved Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for children aged 5 to 11, expanding the country's immunization program in the face of a massive omicron outbreak that is driving up hospitalizations and deaths.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency reported a record 171,452 new virus cases on Wednesday, nearly a 40-fold increase from levels in mid-January when omicron first emerged as the country's dominant strain. The 99 new deaths were the highest daily tally since Dec. 31, when the country was grappling with a delta-driven surge that buckled hospital systems.

More than 500 virus patients are now in serious or [critical condition](#), up from around 200 in mid-February.

In a long-awaited announcement, the Ministry of Drug and Food Safety said it approved the Pfizer vaccine as the country's first shot to be used for children aged 5 to 11. The KDCA said it will announce a vaccine rollout plan for this age group in March.

The Pfizer shot is already used for children aged 5 to 11 in more than 60 countries, including the United States and in the European Union, the MDFS said in a press release. The vaccine will help protect [younger children](#) from infections or serious illness amid South Korea's fast-developing omicron surge, it added.



A medical worker, center, guides people as they wait for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022.

Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

Teenagers and younger children have been linked to a rising number of infections in recent weeks, according to KDCA data, a worrisome development as schools prepare for new semesters in March.

The country had earlier approved vaccinations for people 12 years and older. As of Wednesday, 86.4% of South Korea's more than 51 million people have been vaccinated and nearly 60% have received booster shots.

South Korea was seen as a success story early in the pandemic after it

contained infections and hospitalizations more effectively than most countries in the West. Health authorities worked closely with biotech companies to ramp up [laboratory tests](#) and aggressively mobilized technological tools and public workers to trace contacts and enforce quarantines.

But officials were accused of prematurely easing social distancing rules ahead of a devastating delta-driven spread in December and early January. The country's strengths have been further eroded by the highly transmissible omicron variant, which is stretching worn-out health and public workers.



Medical workers take nasal swab samples from people at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-

joon

The country has been forced to reshape its pandemic response in a way that effectively tolerates the virus' spread among the broader population while concentrating medical resources to protect high-risk groups, including people 60 years or older and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

Officials have significantly eased quarantine restrictions and reduced contact tracing, while more than 520,000 people with mild or moderate symptoms are currently being treated at home to save hospital space. The country has also reshaped its testing policy around rapid antigen test kits, despite concerns over their accuracy and propensity for false-negative results, to save laboratory tests mostly for priority groups.

Many South Koreans are wary of the bend-but-not-break approach as the country continues to report some of the world's highest daily infection numbers.



A medical worker uses a loud speaker to give information to people waiting for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon



People wait for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon



Commuters wearing face masks wait for their trains at a subway station in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

Authorities seem to have limited political capacity to strengthen social distancing ahead of the March presidential election, given people's fatigue and frustration with extended restrictions and the strain on service sector businesses. Despite the growing outbreak, officials last week extended restaurant dining hours by an hour to 10 p.m. over economic considerations, although they have so far maintained a six-person limit on private social gatherings.

"It would be crucial for us to weather the virus spread while minimizing serious illnesses and deaths," Health Ministry official Son Youngrae said during a briefing. He said South Korea's COVID-19 hospital capacities

had expanded since the delta wave and are now able to handle around 2,000 patients with serious illnesses.

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