UK to offer COVID vaccine to all children 5-11

February 16 2022, by Sylvia Hui

A woman wearing a face mask to curb the spread of coronavirus walks past a health campaign poster from the One NGO, in an underpass leading to Westminster underground train station, in London, Thursday, Jan. 27, 2022. Most coronavirus restrictions including mandatory face masks were lifted in England on Thursday, after Britain's government said its vaccine booster rollout successfully reduced serious illness and COVID-19 hospitalizations. From Thursday, face coverings are no longer required by law anywhere in England. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

British authorities will offer a coronavirus vaccine to almost six million children from age 5 to 11, officials said Wednesday.

The government said young children will be offered a low-dose COVID-19 shot on a "non-urgent" basis beginning in April in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also announced similar measures.

"Parents can, if they want, take up the offer to increase protection against potential future waves of COVID-19 as we learn to live with this virus," Health Secretary Sajid Javid said.

The government's independent vaccine advisory committee said while the virus does not pose a threat to most children, a very small number who are infected will develop serious disease.

Around 85% of those 12 and older in the U.K. have been fully vaccinated, but the country has lagged behind the United States and European countries like France, Germany and Italy in vaccinating younger children. Currently, children 11 and under are only eligible for a vaccine if they have medical conditions that put them at serious risk of complications from coronavirus.

Authorities said Wednesday that young children will be offered two 10-microgram doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, with an interval of at least 12 weeks between doses.

Brian Ferguson, an immunology professor at Cambridge University, said the government's vaccine advisory body has been "exceptionally cautious in recommending childhood COVID vaccination" even as millions of children in other countries have had the vaccine with little or no side effects.

"There is an argument that it is now too late to offer the vaccine to this age group, as COVID has torn through primary schools this winter," he said. "However, there are children who have not yet been exposed to COVID who will benefit from immunization, and immunological data indicates that vaccination following infection generates powerful, broadly-neutralizing antibodies."

New daily coronavirus infections have fallen in many parts of the U.K., although the number of cases by age group remained the highest among schoolchildren. The official statistics agency reported Wednesday that around 1 in 13—or 7.6%—of children ages 2 to 11 were likely to have had COVID-19 last week.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to outline his government's long-term strategy for "living with COVID" on Feb. 21. Johnson said last week that all remaining domestic restrictions in England, including the legal requirement for infected individuals to self-isolate, could be lifted within weeks.

England has already scrapped most restrictive measures, such as mandatory face masks and vaccine passports for entering nightclubs and large events. Northern Ireland has lifted all legal restrictions.

Scotland has taken a more cautious approach. Face coverings still are required in indoor public spaces and nightclubs check people's vaccine passports.

Citation: UK to offer COVID vaccine to all children 5-11 (2022, February 16) retrieved 14 May 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-02-scotland-wales-covid-vaccine-children.html