Too early yet for second COVID-19 booster: EU watchdog

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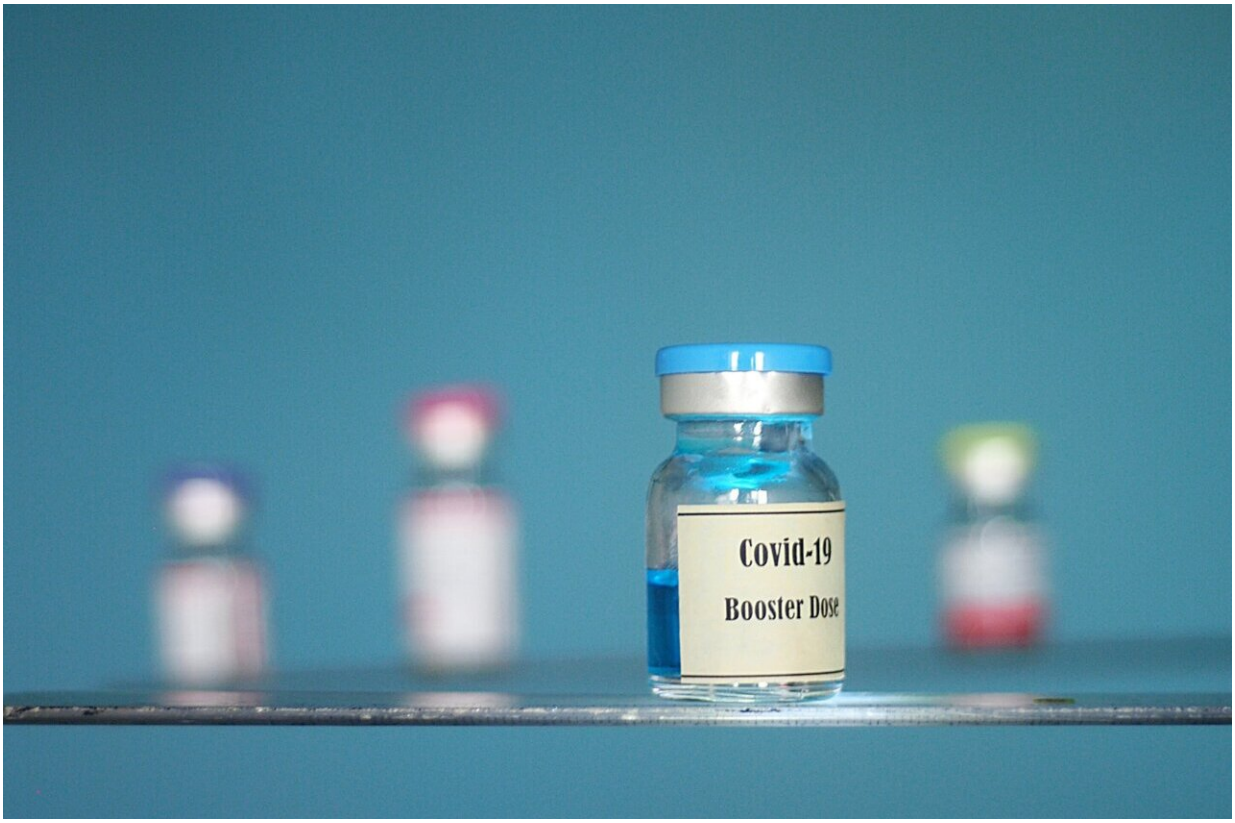

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It is too early to call for a second COVID-19 booster shot, Europe's medicines watchdog said Thursday, despite a rapid spike in new infections caused by the rampant Omicron variant.

Speaking at the European Medicines Agency's bi-weekly press conference, the EMA's vaccines strategy head added that scrapping coronavirus rules in many countries may have played a role in the current rise in cases.

"We notice that infection rates are increasing again in some member states after the steady decrease we witnessed over the past few weeks," Marco Cavaleri said.

The Amsterdam-based agency is "continuing to monitor the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines against the Omicron variant," Cavaleri said.

But "I want to reiterate there is not yet enough evidence... supporting a recommendation for a second booster shot in the general population," he said.

The World Health Organisation on Wednesday voiced alarm at the rising COVID-19 infections globally, despite a drop in testing levels.

After falling for weeks, reported COVID cases rose globally by eight percent last week, with more than 11 million cases and over 43,000 new deaths registered, WHO said.

More than two years into the pandemic, which has officially claimed more than six million deaths—with the true figure believed to be several times as high—the resurgence in cases can mainly be blamed on the spread of infectuous sub-lineages of the Omicron variant, particularly BA.2, Cavaleri said.

He again urged EU residents to get vaccinated, saying "we can see a pattern that countries with high vaccination rates are reporting significantly lower death and hospitalisation rates."

Asked whether the lifting of coronavirus restrictions in many countries had been premature, Cavaleri said: "it is difficult to say whether restrictions have been lifted too early.

"But clearly at this stage we might have to consider that probably this is one of those aspects that contributed to an increase of these cases," Cavaleri said.

The regulator has so far approved five vaccines for use in the EU: Pfizer and Moderna, which use messenger RNA technology, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, which use viral vector technology, and Novavax, which is based on a spike protein produced in a laboratory.