

WHO recommends Merck COVID pill for non-severe, at-risk patients

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This transmission electron microscope image shows SARS-CoV-2 -- also known as 2019-nCoV, the virus that causes COVID-19 -- isolated from a patient in the US. Virus particles are shown emerging from the surface of cells cultured in the

lab. The spikes on the outer edge of the virus particles give coronaviruses their name, crown-like. Credit: NIAID-RML

The World Health Organization on Wednesday recommended an anti-COVID pill be taken by sufferers who have mild symptoms but are at high risk of hospitalization, such as older people or the unvaccinated.

The pill, called molnupiravir and developed by US pharmaceutical Merck, is taken as soon as possible after COVID-19 symptoms develop and then for the following five days.

A WHO group of experts said in the *British Medical Journal* that people with weak immune systems or chronic disease were also recommended to take the pill if they had non-severe COVID.

However "young and healthy patients, including children, and pregnant and breastfeeding women should not be given the drug due to [potential harms](#)," they said.

The UN agency's new recommendation was based on the results of six randomized controlled trials involving 4,796 patients, the "largest dataset on this drug so far".

The trials suggested that molnupiravir reduced the risk of going to hospital, with 43 fewer admissions per 1,000 high-risk patients, as well as speeding up the pace at which symptoms cleared up by an average of 3.4 days.

There was less indication it had an affect on mortality, with just six fewer deaths per 1,000 patients.

The WHO acknowledged "that cost and availability issues associated with molnupiravir may make access to low- and [middle-income countries](#) challenging and exacerbate health inequity".

While vaccines remain the foremost tools in the fight against the pandemic, experts have welcomed the addition of the new oral treatments, which inhibit the virus' ability to replicate and should withstand variants.

The only other main anti-COVID pill available is Pfizer's Paxlovid.

However more potential concerns have been raised about Merck's pill, which the US Food and Drug Administration has not authorized for under-18s because it could affect bone and cartilage growth.

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