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France aiming to start COVID vaccinations in January

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France said Tuesday it was preparing to kick off a nationwide COVID vaccination campaign in January when it hopes virus shots will be approved and available.

The government is worried that millions of French people will refuse coronavirus shots, even after a vaccine was found to be nearly 95 percent effective on Monday, bringing optimism to a world facing surging infections and a raft of new stay-at-home orders.

US biotech firm Moderna on Monday claimed 94.5 percent effectiveness in a clinical vaccine trial with more than 30,000 participants, after US pharmaceutical company Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech said last week that their vaccine was 90 percent effective.

According to the World Health Organization, some 42 "candidate vaccines" are currently undergoing clinical trials.

"We're preparing a vaccination campaign to be ready the moment that a vaccine is approved by European and national health authorities so we can launch a vaccine immediately," government spokesman Gabriel Attal told France 2 television.

The growing vaccine scepticism in France could however confound a public health campaign on immunization.

Only 59 percent of French people are prepared to get vaccinated, according to an Ipsos opinion poll published in September, compared with 74 percent worldwide.

"My fear is that not enough French people will get vaccinated," Prime Minister Jean Castex said at the weekend.

France has budgeted 1.5 billion euros ($1.77 billion) to buy vaccines in 2021, Attal told France 2 television.

Noting that the European Medicines Agency said it may be ready to

authorise a first vaccine by the end of the year, Attal said France had placed options on "several hundreds of millions" of doses from different pharma companies.

The final choice will be for the vaccine "that gives us the best chance to contain the pandemic" without presenting "even the slightest risk" for health, he said.

The novel coronavirus has killed at least 1,319,561 people worldwide since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP on Monday.

At least 54,493,680 cases of coronavirus have been registered worldwide.

In France alone, around 33,500 people are currently in hospital with COVID, of whom nearly 5,000 are in intensive care.

French daily case numbers have been falling since a new nationwide lockdown was imposed on October 30, but the government warned it was too early to claim victory.

France has reported just over 45,000 COVID deaths since the outbreak of the epidemic.

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