

Coronavirus treatment

UK approves Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine

Move boosts hopes that millions more Britons can be inoculated in the coming months



Health secretary Matt Hancock said the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine rollout would begin on January 4, with enough doses 'on order to vaccinate the whole population' © Joel Saget/AFP/Getty

Donato Paolo Mancini in Rome and **Sarah Neville** and **Sebastian Payne** in London AN HOUR AGO

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The UK drugs watchdog has approved the coronavirus vaccine made by Oxford university and AstraZeneca, boosting hopes that millions more Britons can be inoculated against the disease in the coming months as a new viral variant of Covid-19 takes hold.

AstraZeneca said on Wednesday the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency had given the jab an emergency authorisation, making it the first country to approve the vaccine. This will allow it to be rushed to patients, offering renewed hope of taming the pandemic as the number of patients with Covid-19 in English hospitals reached [an all-time high](#).

Health secretary Matt Hancock said the vaccine roll out would begin on January 4, with preparations made for its delivery in the coming days.

“We’ve got enough of this vaccine on order to vaccinate the whole population,” he told the BBC, adding the 100m doses the UK has purchased would cover the whole adult population. “By the spring, enough people will be protected to allow us to exit the pandemic,” he said.

The new [variant of Covid-19](#) identified in the UK earlier this month has seen infection rates soar and Mr Hancock is expected to announce tougher curbs across England later on Wednesday.

Pascal Soriot, AstraZeneca chief executive, told the BBC’s *Today* programme he was confident the vaccine would work against the new variant.

\$3-\$4

The expected price of a single Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine dose, which the group has pledged to sell at cost

“Our colleagues at Oxford are working very intensively with the NHS to test that and confirm this but our belief is the vaccine will work,” he said.

The vaccine’s approval is expected to significantly ramp up the UK’s mass vaccination programme. It is easier to

store than the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine, which has [been at the centre](#) of the campaign but must be kept at minus 70C, making difficult to access for care homes and GP practices.

The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine can be stored at between 2C and 8C — the temperature of a conventional fridge — making it easier to distribute. Moreover, it may not require people to be monitored for 15 minutes after receiving the shot, which would help maintain social distancing.

The vaccine's dosage will also speed up the programme. The MHRA has approved a dosing regimen of two doses at an interval of between four and 12 weeks that in trials proved 100 per cent successful in preventing severe disease.

This will allow far more Britons to be vaccinated quickly, without the need to reserve the current supply because there should be time to manufacture additional doses.

“We are going to be able to inject a lot of people with one dose very quickly and provide them with a reasonably good level of protection until they get the second dose. It will enable us to protect many more people because we can wait two to three months for the second dose,” Mr Soriot said.

The health and social care department said: “Throughout this global pandemic we have always been guided by the latest scientific advice. Having studied evidence on both the BioNTech/Pfizer and Oxford university/AstraZeneca vaccines, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has advised the priority should be to give as many people in at-risk groups their first dose, rather than providing the required two doses in as short a time as possible.

“Everyone will still receive their second dose and this will be within 12 weeks of their first. The second dose completes the course and is important for longer term protection,” it added.

The UK has placed forward orders for a total of 357m doses of coronavirus vaccine from a variety of companies. Several have yet to complete late-stage trials.

The longer period between doses, coupled with ease of storage and [at-cost pricing](#) during the pandemic, have made the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine an attractive option for other countries. Supply deals indicate a single dose will be priced at about \$3 to \$4. AstraZeneca has pledged to sell the vaccine at cost to developing nations in perpetuity after Oxford insisted on access conditions.

The British approval of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine comes ahead of expected nods from US and EU regulators. The EU and US have respectively placed orders for 400m and 300m doses.

However, the European Medicines Agency will not assess the vaccine until at least next month, as it has not yet received an application from the drugmaker, it confirmed on Tuesday.

US regulators are waiting for a late-stage trial to end before assessing the vaccine.

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