Swiss swift start on Covid-19 vaccinations

23 December 2020

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Switzerland started its COVID-19 vaccine rollout on Wednesday, with a care home resident in her 90s receiving the first shot just four days after the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was authorised.

The woman, who lives in the Lucerne region in central Switzerland, was the first person in continental Europe immunised with the Pfizer-BioNTech jab in a vaccination campaign.

Switzerland is battling stubbornly high coronavirus cases, recording around 5,000 fresh infections and 100 new deaths on Wednesday, in a country of 8.6 million people.

From Tuesday, bars and restaurants began closing again across the country in a bid to rein in the outbreak, while flights to and from Britain and South Africa have been banned following the discovery of a new variant of the virus that UK officials believe spreads far more easily.

Britain was the first country to deploy the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, with 90-year-old grandmother Margaret Keenan receiving the jab on December 8.

European Union countries are scheduled to start vaccinations on Sunday.

Switzerland has seen more than 421,000 infections and over 6,400 deaths since the pandemic began.

'Great hope'

The Swissmedic regulatory authority announced on Saturday that it had approved the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine following a two-month rolling review.

The elderly and those with pre-existing conditions—two million people in total—are first in line for immunisation.

"I am very satisfied that we have now been able to start vaccinations in the canton of Lucerne," the region's health services chief Guido Graf said in a statement.

The neighbouring Zug canton also started vaccinating in a nursing home.

"There is great hope that the vaccinations will combat the spread of the coronavirus effectively and bring it under control," said Zug's cantonal health director Martin Pfister.

Among the main Swiss cities, Geneva and Basel are set to start their vaccination campaigns on Monday, while Zurich will get going on January 4.

Geneva's hospital received its first 5,000 doses on Wednesday.

"After a month of virtual discussions, things are becoming tangible," said Nathalie Vernaz, the cantonal pharmacist.

In early November, Geneva had the worst per capita infection rates in Europe.

Army distributing doses

Produced by US pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer and German biotechnology company BioNTech, the vaccine is based on a new technology that uses

[genetic material](#) in the form of mRNA (messenger ribonucleic acid).

The Swiss army is storing and distributing the vaccine doses, which must be kept at -70 degrees Celsius (-94 degrees Fahrenheit).

It received an initial delivery of 107,000 doses on Tuesday, with 250,000 per month to follow from January.

The vaccine is not mandatory but is free of charge.

Switzerland has secured around 15.8 million COVID-19 [vaccine](#) doses, in deals with three manufacturers.

It has signed contracts for around three million doses from Pfizer-BioNTech, around 7.5 million from Moderna, and around 5.3 million from AstraZeneca.

With each of the three different vaccines, two doses are required per person.

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