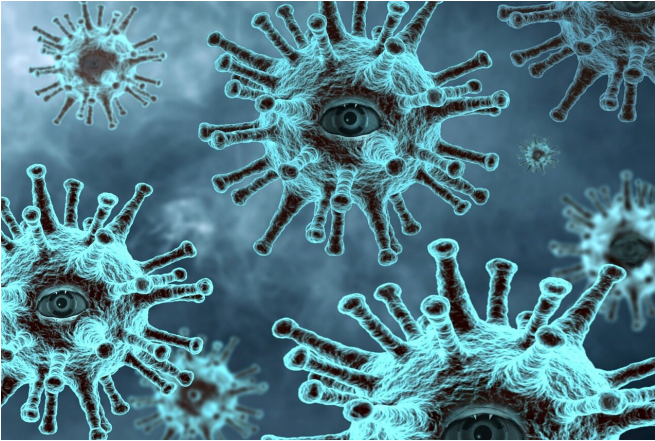


Official: Mexico nears approval of Russia's COVID-19 vaccine

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Mexico was on the verge of approving the Russian COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V following the publication of early results of an advanced study, Mexican officials said Tuesday.

Assistant Health Secretary Hugo López-Gatell, the government's pandemic spokesman, said that the health ministry signed a contract Monday for 400,000 doses of Sputnik V that will arrive this month. He said regulatory approval was expected within hours.

Once approved, the Russian vaccine would become the third to receive emergency approval in Mexico. The regulating agency approved the Pfizer vaccine in December and AstraZeneca's in January. Mexico turned to the Russian vaccine following delays in obtaining others it was counting on.

A dozen countries have already approved the Russian vaccine for use, including Bolivia and Argentina, where López-Gatell visited in January to learn more about it. He acknowledged that there had been a "legitimate concern" among

Mexicans, but that the early results published Tuesday in the medical journal *The Lancet* should alleviate them.

"The Russian Sputnik V vaccine is safe, it has 92% efficacy against COVID, it can be used safely and is effective in seniors," López-Gatell said. "It allows us now to accelerate the step of vaccination against COVID in Mexico."

Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador spoke with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin a week ago.

Mexico has so far given about 675,000 doses of vaccine, all of them from Pfizer, leaving a long way to go in a population of 126 million. On Tuesday, a second batch of the active substance in the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in Mexico, where it will be packed and distributed through the rest of Latin America.

The Mexican government on Tuesday also launched a new website for people over the age of 60 to register for vaccination appointments.

However, the Mexican Health Department apparently didn't have the bandwidth to handle requests. The department's website was quickly overwhelmed and the registration page didn't load, returning a message of "This site can't be reached."

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