

Canada approves AstraZeneca Covid vaccine

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Canada on Friday authorized a third Covid-19 vaccine, adding AstraZeneca's candidate to its approved list alongside the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna shots.

Ottawa has ordered 20 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, developed with Oxford University, officials said, and two million shots of the same formula made by the Serum Institute of India.

"In other words, we now have a third safe and effective vaccine independently approved by health experts in Canada," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told a news conference.

"This is very encouraging news. It means more people vaccinated, and sooner."

Officials said evaluations of Johnson & Johnson's and Novovax's respective Covid-19 vaccines have been completed and decisions on their approvals are expected soon.

The World Health Organization has announced that the AstraZeneca vaccine could be given to people aged 65 and over despite concerns about its efficacy, and used in countries where variants of the novel coronavirus have been found.

Canada said it will make it available to its citizens aged over 18.

It has been found to be about 62 percent effective in preventing infection, compared to more than 90 percent for the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines that are based on different technology.

Already in use in Britain and the European Union, it requires two doses four to 12 weeks apart to offer the best protection, but does not need to be stored in extreme cold temperatures in contrast to the Pfizer vaccine, making its distribution simpler and with a broader reach.

Canada started its vaccine rollout in December 2020 but recently faced shortages due to European manufacturing issues, with no production capacity of its own.

"Canada is hungry for vaccines," Health Canada senior advisor Supriya Sharma told a separate media briefing. "We're putting more on the buffet table."

The department, she added, has concluded "that the benefits outweigh the risks."

As of Friday, Canada has reported more than 858,000 cases of the coronavirus and 21,865 fatalities.

Ottawa has ordered or reserved more than 400 million doses of vaccine from seven suppliers for a population of 38 million.

The first shipment from the Serum Institute of India is scheduled to arrive within weeks, with the remainder to be delivered over the next couple of months.

By the end of March, Trudeau said, Ottawa expects to receive a total of 6.5 million Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccine doses, and tens of millions more in April and June—getting back on track to a stated target of inoculating all Canadians by September.

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