

U.K.

U.K. Plans to Roll Out Booster Shots in September

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By Stephen Fidler

LONDON—The U.K. government said it is preparing to deliver booster Covid-19 vaccine shots from September, in case extra protection is needed to deal with waning immunity from initial doses and to bolster protection against new variants of the coronavirus.

The U.K. is among the first governments to set out provisional plans for booster shots, following advice from specialists who are concerned that possible further Covid-19 outbreaks over the winter could coincide with a wave of influenza and put pressure on the country's health system.

The government said the actual rollout would depend on further advice from an expert group known as the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization, based on a host of new data, including whether protection from the vaccines weakens after six months.

The Delta Dilemma
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Delta Most Common Covid-19 Variant in U.S., Data Show

Vaccinated People Who Get Infected Carry Less Covid-19 Virus

Vaccine Mix Study Suggests Combinations Safe and Effective

How Long Do Covid-19 Vaccines Provide Immunity?

The Delta Covid-19 Variant Is Spreading: What Does This Mean for the U.S.?

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said the advice would help preparations for the fall. "We need to learn to live with this virus," he said.

The booster program will, in principle, start in September among people of age 70 and over, as well as those who are clinically vulnerable, before being rolled out to those 50 and older. The JCVI has suggested delivering flu shots and the Covid-19 doses at the same time.

With flu suppressed last winter because of social-distancing rules, the JCVI said some mathematical models suggest flu infections could run 50% higher than in a typical year.

The U.K. has authorized four Covid-19 vaccines for use and has placed orders for others that may become available in time for a booster program. A U.K. study published this week, which wasn't independently reviewed, suggested that combining the vaccine produced by Pfizer Inc. with one from AstraZeneca PLC provided a strong immune response against Covid-19. A bigger study is under way in the U.K. involving at least seven vaccines, the results of which are due by September.

The JCVI said booster shots specifically designed to cope with new variants of the disease wouldn't be available in time for the program's rollout.

It isn't yet clear how long the protection given by vaccines will last, partly because of the limited time since the first doses were administered. Some studies suggest antibodies generated by vaccines could decline in months—while others hint at longer protection. In

any case, antibodies aren't the body's only immune response and other elements of the immune system could operate to protect against Covid-19. More data on this should become available in coming months.

Almost 85% of U.K. adults have received at least one shot of vaccine and more than 62% have received two. The government said it is on track to offer a first dose to all adults by July 19.

The announcement comes as the Delta variant is sweeping the country, accounting for 97% of identified cases according to the most recent figures. Data from Public Health England showed vaccines work well against the Delta variant, with the Pfizer shot 96% effective and the AstraZeneca shot 92% effective against hospitalization after two doses.

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