

International

US authorizes COVID boosters for adults, recommends for over-50s

World's hardest-hit country enters a new winter wave

WASHINGTON: The United States authorized the Pfizer and Moderna COVID vaccine boosters for all people aged 18 and older on Friday, as the world's hardest-hit country enters a new winter wave of the pandemic. Boosters were previously available to the immune compromised, people over 65, those at high risk of severe disease, and people in high risk occupations.

The new decision "helps to provide continued protection against COVID-19, including the serious consequences that can occur, such as hospitalization and death," acting commissioner Janet Woodcock of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said. A panel of experts convened by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) then ratified the decision to broaden eligibility, while explicitly recommending boosters for all people over 50, even absent underlying conditions.

"I am really glad that we have clarity and streamlining of the recommendations so that all Americans can understand the vaccines that are recommended for them at this time," said Camille Kotton, an infectious disease clinician at Massachusetts General Hospital. CDC director Rochelle Walensky formally signed off on the panel's recommendations, stating that boosters

"are an important public health tool to strengthen our defenses against the virus as we enter the winter holidays."

The FDA said it based its decision on data demonstrating a strong immune response to boosters from hundreds of people dosed with both brands of vaccines. Pfizer also carried out a clinical trial involving 10,000 people aged over 16 which found that the booster showed an efficacy against symptomatic infection of more than 95 percent compared to those who did not receive a booster. Both vaccines are available to people six months after completing their primary series.

Pfizer's vaccine is dosed at 30 micrograms, the same as the primary series, while Moderna's is 50 micrograms, half the primary series. People who received the Johnson & Johnson one-dose vaccine were already eligible for a booster of any brand two months after their first shot. The booster decision comes as cases are rap-

idly rising nationally, reaching 88,000 new infections per day on average as the country enters its fifth wave, according to the latest data. America is officially the pandemic's hardest-hit country, with more than 760,000 deaths.

Many unknowns

Prior to Friday's decision, some outside experts had expressed misgivings over widening boosters to all adults. The vast majority of those people becoming hospitalized or dying with COVID are unvaccinated, and the best way to control the winter wave would be to reach those people, rather than topping up the vaccinated, the critics said. A potential downside, they argued,

was that vaccine holdouts might conclude the shots are ineffective. Another risk is a greater number of cases of vaccine-linked heart inflammation (myocarditis), especially among younger males. Accumulating evidence shows the risk may be

greater for the Moderna vaccine compared to Pfizer, likely because of its higher dose.

Both companies are conducting post-authorization studies to assess the risks of myocarditis after third shots. Overall, however, both health agencies took the view that the benefits outweigh the risks. It is expected that boosters, by reducing symptomatic cases, will also help reduce community transmission, though the extent to which this might happen is not known. It is also possible that, rather than considering the third dose a booster, the vaccines work optimally when administered three times - something that will become more clear over time as data accrues.

Experts are in broad agreement however that boosters alone can't resolve the pandemic while the poorest countries, especially in Africa, remain stuck in the single-digit percentages for people covered by their initial shots. Last week, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus decried the fact that rich countries are administering six times more vaccine doses every day than low-income countries are delivering primary doses. This increases the risk of new variants of concern emerging in those regions, which could eventually evade the protective action of current vaccines. — AFP



Over 760,000 perish in US

World weighs laws to rein in mighty algorithms

PARIS: From the YouTube videos we're recommended to deciding who gets a job, algorithms wield an ever-growing influence over our lives-and policy-makers worldwide want to rein them in. While China is worried about delivery app algorithms that encourage their drivers to speed, US lawmakers are grappling with social media recommendation systems that have sent some users down dangerous rabbit-holes.

"Algorithms can be useful, of course, but many people simply aren't aware of just how much their experience on these platforms is being manipulated," John Thune, one of numerous US senators proposing new social media legislation, wrote in a CNN op-ed. Facebook has faced fierce criticism after a whistleblower revealed that executives knew the site's algorithm systematically promoted inflammatory posts in people's newsfeeds, fuelling division and unrest from India to Ethiopia.

Frances Haugen, the ex-Facebook engineer behind the revelations, believes people deserve to know more about how the content they see is shaped by the jumble of data that gets fed into the social media machine. "I think if we just say, 'we are going to regulate algorithms', that is so amorphous," Haugen told AFP in an interview last week. "I think it's more powerful to say, 'Hey Facebook, you have a lot more transparency than we do,'" and force the company to reveal more about how its systems work, she said.

More boring social media?

Campaigners and lawmakers may agree that tech giants' algorithms need more public oversight, but how to achieve that is a different matter. "There are some really hard unanswered questions," said Daphne Keller, director of platform regulation at the Stanford Cyber Policy Center. In the European Union, where lawmakers are debating two vast pieces of tech legislation, "some proposals say algorithms should prioritise authoritative sources of information, and others say they should prioritise diverse sources", Keller noted.

"How do you reconcile those two goals?" The path forward is just as unclear in the US, where dozens of legal amendments have been proposed by lawmakers torn over what exactly it is about social media that needs fixing. "On the left, people don't like all the harmful stuff like hate speech and misinformation; on the right, people think that their free speech is being taken away," summarized Noah Gianiracusa, author of "How Algorithms Create and Prevent Fake News". Politicians and academics have suggested various means of limiting the harmful side-effects of social media algorithms-none without their complications.

Some suggest platforms like Facebook and Twitter could be made legally liable for what they publish, which would discourage them from amplifying posts that spread hate or misinformation. But in the US, where most social media giants are based, Gianiracusa said this would quickly face legal challenges from critics charging that it violates the right to freedom of speech. Alternatively, governments could restrict social networks' ability to personalize what people see in their feeds.

YouTube and Facebook have been accused of unintentionally radicalizing some people in this way, feeding them post after post of conspiracy theory-laden content. Social media companies could be obliged to simply show people posts in chronological order-but that risks making scrolling down a feed more boring. The algorithms would no longer be able to calculate what a user will probably find interesting-a photo of a close friend getting married, for instance-while downgrading tedious posts about what an acquaintance had for lunch. "There is no simple solution," Gianiracusa concluded. — AFP

Austria imposes partial lockdown, mandatory jabs

VIENNA: Austria has become the first EU country to announce it would make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory and will next week impose a partial lockdown in the face of spiraling infections. The lockdown, which comes into effect tomorrow, constitutes the toughest restrictions introduced in Europe in recent weeks as COVID-19 cases surge continent-wide, fuelled by vaccine resistance.

Austrians will not be allowed to leave home except to go to work, shop for essentials and exercise. The restrictions will initially last 20 days with an evaluation after 10 days, Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said. Schools will remain open, although parents have been asked to keep their children at home if possible. Working from home is also recommended.

Vaccination against COVID-19 in the Alpine nation will be mandatory from February 1 next year, Schallenberg said. So far, the Vatican alone in Europe has imposed a vaccination mandate. The World Health Organization continues to favor policies that "demonstrate the benefit and safety of vaccines for the greatest possible acceptance of vaccines, rather than imposed mandatory vaccination," spokeswoman Fadela Chaib told reporters in Geneva.

But Schallenberg said: "Despite months of persuasion, we have not succeeded in convincing enough people to get vaccinated," and that vaccination is the only "exit ticket" out of the pandemic. Austria has already imposed movement restrictions on those not vaccinated or recently recovered from the virus, ordering them to stay at home since Monday, becoming the first EU country to

US president hits 79: potential successors watch from wings

WASHINGTON: As Joe Biden pops the cork on his alcohol-free birthday bubbly this weekend he will not need to be reminded that he was born as close to the end of Abraham Lincoln's presidency as he was to the start of his own. The veteran Democrat, who turns 79 yesterday, has said publicly he intends to run for reelection but there has been persistent speculation that he could change his mind given his advanced years. There is usually little intrigue around the nomination when a US president is still in his first term, as no occupant of the White House has declined to seek reelection since Lyndon Johnson more than 50 years ago.

But Biden would be 86 at the end of a second term, and potential successors and their sponsors are already circling, seeing another four years as an assignment too far in Biden's storied political career. In a new Politico/Morning Consult poll, only 40

US can benefit Africa amid rising Chinese influence: Blinken

DAKAR: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Friday that Washington will treat Africa a "major geopolitical power" where it can deliver tangible benefits, making the case to preserve US influence as rival China invests heavily. Days before China holds a major meeting on Africa in Senegal, where Blinken arrived later Friday, the top US diplomat said President Joe Biden plans to convene a summit of African leaders, which the White House said will be held next year.

In an address at the headquarters of the West African bloc ECOWAS in Abuja, Blinken made no explicit mention of China but said he knew Africans have been "wary of the strings" that often come with foreign engagement. "I want to be clear - the



VIENNA: Demonstrators take part in a rally held by Austria's far-right Freedom Party FPÖe against the measures taken to curb the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, at Maria Theresien Platz square in Vienna yesterday. — AFP

do so. But infections have continued to rise. On Friday, a new record of more than 15,800 new cases was recorded in the EU member of nearly nine million people.

'Tragedy'

"I was hoping that there wouldn't be a general lockdown," said Markus Horvath as he prepared to shut from Monday his stall selling wooden jewellery at a Christmas market in Vienna. Christian Edlmayr, selling glass ornaments at another Vienna Christmas market, said he would lose half his yearly revenue. "This will be very, very bad for me," he said. Under the partial lockdown, only outlets deemed essential will remain open such as supermarkets, banks, pharmacies and post offices.

Andreas Schneider, a 31-year-old from Belgium who works as an economist in the Austrian capital, also described the lockdown as a "tragedy", saying confining just the unvaccinated had been "reasonable" since they had a choice.

Other European countries are also re-introducing curbs to fight the virus's spread. On Friday, the German state of Bavaria cancelled all of its popular Christmas markets this year, and announced a shutdown of clubs, bars and night service at restaurants. "The situation is very, very serious and difficult," state premier Markus Soeder told a news conference. Last Saturday, the Netherlands shut bars, restaurants, cafes and supermarkets from 8:00 pm for three weeks with non-essential shops forced to shut at 6:00 pm. — AFP



MARYLAND: US President Joe Biden boards a helicopter after getting a medical check up at Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. — AFP

percent of voters surveyed agreed with the statement that Biden "is in good health," while 50 percent disagreed—a 29-point shift over a year. "If his health declines, as sometimes happens in one's 80s, his plans might change," said David Greenberg, a journalism and history professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

United States doesn't want to limit your partnerships with other countries," Blinken said.

"We don't want to make you choose. We want to give you choices. Our approach will be sustainable, transparent and values-driven," he said. He said that other nations' infrastructure deals can be "opaque, coercive, burden countries with unmanageable debt, are environmentally destructive and don't always benefit the people who actually live there." "We will do things differently," he said.

The Biden administration considers a rising and authoritarian China the top 21st-century challenge of the United States but has taken a more subtle approach than the previous administration of Donald Trump, which loudly berated the Asian power. Blinken's speech also departed markedly in emphasis from previous administrations of both parties by dwelling little about military cooperation, long on the top of the US wish-list in Africa. The Biden administration "firmly believes that it's time to stop treating Africa as a subject of geopolitics - and start treating it as the major geopolitical player it has become," Blinken said. — AFP

"That would create a wide-open field, with many of the 2020 runners-up as possibilities, as well as a lot of people who didn't run." If Biden were to become the nation's first octogenarian presidential candidate, he would be somewhat undermining the status he gave himself during the campaign as a "bridge" to the next generation-taken by many as a tacit assurance that he would not seek a second term. History-making Kamala Harris-the first woman and first Black and Asian American ever sworn in as vice president-would be the heir apparent.

But her halo has slipped amid a run of negative press alleging dysfunction among her staff, casting doubt on her standing within the administration and reporting her frustrations over her thorny assignments. Asked by ABC Thursday if she'd spoken to Biden about his plans for the future, Harris said "absolutely not," adding that the administration was focused on infrastructure, national security and other priorities. She rejected reports that she was feeling misused or wrongly deployed, telling the channel: "We're getting things done, and we're doing it together." But Harris has struggled to make an impact, with her approval dipping to 28 percent in one survey, and headlines outlining her frustrations over being politically sidelined and set up for failure. — AFP



DAKAR: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (background left) watches as Bechtel President for Europe, Africa and the Middle East Justin Sibera (left) and Ageroute Director General Ibrahim Ndiaye (right) congratulate after signed an agreement during a commercial diplomatic event with US companies and the government of Senegal yesterday. — AFP