

Coronavirus

'J&J shot to resume'

EMA to issue advice on J&J's COVID shot

LONDON, April 20, (AP) — Experts at the European Medicines Agency are preparing to present the conclusions of their investigation later on Tuesday into possible links between the Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine and very rare cases of unusual clotting disorders detected in the US.

Last week, J&J halted its European rollout of its one-dose vaccine after the US Food and Drug Administration recommended officials pause its use while the rare blood clot cases are examined. Officials identified six cases of the highly unusual blood clots among nearly 7 million people who were immunized with the shot in the US.

J&J advised European governments to store their doses until the EU drug regulator issued guidance on their use; widespread use of the shot in Europe has not yet started.

The delay was a further blow to vaccination efforts in the European Union, which have been plagued by supply shortages, logistical problems and concerns over unusual blood clots also in a small number of people who received the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. Experts worry the temporary halt on J&J's shot could further shake vaccine confidence and complicate worldwide COVID-19 immunization efforts.

Last week, South Africa suspended its use of the vaccine in the wake of the US pause, and countries including Italy, Romania, the Netherlands, Denmark and Croatia put their J&J doses into storage.

The blood clots linked to the J&J vaccine are occurring in unusual parts of the body, such as veins that drain blood from the brain. Those patients also have abnormally low levels of blood platelets, a condition normally linked to bleeding, not clotting.

With the AstraZeneca vaccine, scientists in Norway and Germany have suggested that some people are experiencing an abnormal immune system response, forming antibodies that attack their own platelets.

Immune

It's not yet clear if there might be a similar mechanism with the J&J vaccine. But both the J&J and AstraZeneca vaccines, as well as a Russian COVID-19 vaccine and one from China, are made with the same technology. They train the immune system to recognize the spike protein that coats the coronavirus. To do that, they use a cold virus, called an adenovirus, to carry the spike gene into the body.

Earlier this month, the EU drug regulator said there was a "possible link" between the AstraZeneca shot and rare blood clots but said the benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks of COVID-19. It noted the risk is less than the blood clot risk that healthy women face from birth control pills.

The United States will likely move to resume Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine this coming week, possibly with restrictions or broader warnings after reports of some very rare blood clot cases, the government's top infectious diseases expert said Sunday.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, in a series of news show interviews, said he expects a decision when advisers to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention meet Friday to discuss the pause in J&J's single-dose vaccine.

"I would be very surprised if we don't have a resumption in some form by Friday," he said. "I don't really anticipate that they're going to want it stretch it out a bit longer."

Fauci, who is President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser, said he believed that federal regulators could bring the shots back with restrictions based on age or gender or with a blanket warning, so that it is administered in a way "a little bit different than we were before the pause."

The J&J vaccine has been in limbo after the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration said last week they needed more evidence to decide if a handful of unusual blood clots were linked to the shot - and if so, how big the risk is.

The reports are rare - six cases out of more than 7 million US inoculations with J&J vaccine. The clots were found in six women between the ages of 18 and 48. One person died.

The acting FDA commissioner had said she expected the pause to last only a matter of days. Still, the decision last Tuesday triggered swift action in Europe and elsewhere.

Doubted

Fauci said he doubted very seriously that the US would permanently halt use of the J&J vaccine.

"I don't think that's going to happen," he said. "The pause was to take a look, make sure we know all the information we can have within that timeframe, and also warn some of the physicians out there who might see people, particularly women, who have this particular adverse event, that they treat them properly."

"I think it'll likely say, 'OK, we're going to use it. But be careful under these certain circumstances.'"

More than 6.8 million doses of the J&J vaccine have been given in the US, the vast majority with no or mild side effects. Authorities stressed they have found no sign of clot problems with the most widely used COVID-19 vaccines in the US - from Moderna and Pfizer.

Meanwhile, a key contract manufacturer for Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine has stopped making bulk vaccine substance and is retaining what's already been made at its Baltimore Bayview factory while US regulators continue inspecting it due to quality problems.

The news was disclosed Monday in a Securities and Exchange Commission filing. It raises questions about whether problems at the Emergent BioSolutions Inc. factory will prevent Johnson & Johnson from meeting its US supply commitments.

Johnson & Johnson says it remains committed to providing 100 million doses of the single-shot vaccine pledged by the end of June. It says "it is premature to speculate on any potential impact this could have on the timing of our vaccine deliveries."

Also:

WASHINGTON: The State Department on Monday urged Americans reconsider any international travel they may have planned and said it would issue specific warnings not to visit roughly 80% of the world's countries due to risks from the coronavirus pandemic.

The United States hasn't had a global advisory warning against international travel since August, when guidance was revoked by the Trump administration.

The advice issued by the department isn't a formal global advisory. Instead, it says the State Department will start using Centers for Disease Control and Prevention standards as it prepares health and safety guidelines for individual countries. Because of those standards, about 80% of countries will be classified as "Level 4" or "do not travel."

Travel is also discouraged for the remaining 20%, though not as emphatically. It says people with plans to visit those countries should reconsider before proceeding.

The department did not reveal which countries will fall under which category. That will become known as guidance is issued individually for each country in the coming week.

"The COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose unprecedented risks to travelers. In light of those risks, the Department of State strongly recommends US citizens reconsider all travel abroad," it said.

The department said the new classifications don't necessarily reflect changes in the countries' health situations, but rather an adjustment in the criteria on which it bases the alerts.



Fauci



Simone Ravera, patient of the 'MEDIAN Clinic Heiligendamm', makes exercises after an interview with The Associated Press in Heiligendamm, northern Germany, Wednesday, April 14. The MEDIAN Clinic, specialized on lung diseases, treats COVID-19 long time patients from all over Germany. (AP)



A halo around the sun caused by ice crystals is seen above quiet streets in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Tuesday, April 20. Cambodia's leader said that the country's capital Phnom Penh will be locked down for two weeks from Thursday, April 15, following a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases. (AP)



Gonsalves



Rogers

Discovery

'Tyrannosaurs lived in packs': Ferocious tyrannosaur dinosaurs may not have been solitary predators as long envisioned, but more like social carnivores such as wolves, new research unveiled Monday found.

Paleontologists developed the theory while studying a mass tyrannosaur death site found seven years ago in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah, one of two monuments that the Biden administration is considering restoring to their full size after former president Donald Trump shrunk them.

Using geochemical analysis of the bones and rock, a team of researchers with the University of Arkansas determined that the dinosaurs died and were buried in the same place and were not the result of fossils washing in from multiple areas.

Kristi Curry Rogers, a biology professor at Macalester College, said this research is a "good start" but more evidence would be needed before determining that the tyrannosaurs were living in a social group.

"It is a little tougher to be so sure that these data mean that these tyrannosaurs lived together in the good times," Rogers said. "It's possible that these animals may have lived in the same vicinity as one another without traveling together in a social group, and just came together around dwindling resources as times got tougher."

In 2014, Bureau of Land Management paleontologist Alan Titus discovered the site, which was later named the Rainbows and Unicorns quarry because of the vast array of fossils contained inside. Excavation has been ongoing since the site's discovery because of the size of the area and volume of bones. "I consider this a once-in-a-lifetime discovery for myself," Titus told reporters during a virtual news conference. "I probably won't find another site this exciting and scientifically significant during my career." (AP)

St. Vincent pleads for help: The prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines made a heartfelt plea Monday to the international community to help his country recover from a volcanic eruption that has displaced 20,000 people, saying the island nation is "in its midnight hour of need."

"Across our land, the faces of men and women are strained and anxious. They're hurting badly," Prime Minister **Ralph Gonsalves** told the UN Security Council, saying his country is confronting "a monumental challenge of humanitarian relief."

La Soufrière, the volcano on the Carib-

Coronavirus

Learning to breathe

German clinic helps COVID long haulers

HEILIGENDAMM, Germany, April 20, (AP) — Simone Ravera rolls up her trousers, slips off her shoes and socks, then gingerly steps into the chilly waters of the Baltic Sea.

The 50-year-old rheumatology nurse is slowly finding her feet again after being struck down with COVID-19 last fall, seemingly recovering and then relapsing with severe fatigue and "brain fog" four months later.

"The symptoms were almost as bad as at the beginning," Ravera said.

Close to despair, she found a clinic that specializes in treating people with what have been called post-COVID-19, or long-term COVID-19, symptoms.

Located in Heiligendamm, a north German seaside spa popular since the late 18th century, the clinic specializes in helping people with lung diseases such as asthma, chronic bronchitis and cancer.

Over the past year it has become a major rehabilitation center for COVID-19 patients, treating 600 people from across Germany, according to its medical director, Dr. Joerdis Frommhold.

Some of her patients came close to death and now have to relearn how to breathe properly, rebuild their stamina and overcome a host of neurological problems associated with severe illness.

But Frommhold also treats a second group of patients who experienced mild to medium COVID-19 symptoms, and only spent a short time in the hospital, if at all.

"These patients get rebound symptoms after about one to four months," Frommhold said.

Most are aged between 18 to 50 and have no pre-existing conditions, she said. "They're the ones that are usually never ill."

After recovering from a bout of COVID-19, these patients suddenly find themselves short of breath, depressed and struggling to concentrate, said Frommhold. Some suffer symptoms resembling those of dementia.

One former dialysis nurse found her kitchen flooded because she'd forgotten to turn off the tap. "Others are unable to do homework with their kids because they don't understand the questions themselves," Frommhold said.

Their symptoms aren't always taken seriously by doctors.

Despite suffering hair loss, joint and muscle pain, irregular blood pressure and dizziness, routine test results for

such patients usually come back normal.

"They appear young, dynamic, high performing, but then they can't do any of the things they used to," Frommhold said.

Therapists at the clinic initially focus on stabilizing patients' breathing. Then they work to restore stamina and motor coordination with the help of occupational therapy and posture training. Cognitive therapy and psychological support are also part of the program.

Similar clinics for "long haulers" have sprung up around the world over the past year, including in the United States. In Germany, such treatment is increasingly being offered by the country's network of more than 1,000 medical rehabilitation centers, 50 of which specialize in pulmonary diseases.

"That doesn't exist in many other countries yet," Frommhold said.

Unclear

It is unclear how many people suffer from long-term COVID-19, partly because the condition isn't clearly defined yet. Scientists are still trying to understand what is behind the wide range of symptoms patients report.

"No two patients have the same experience and it varies within patients," said Elizabeth Murray, a professor of e-health and primary care at University College London.

"The symptoms they are experiencing this week are not necessarily a guide to the symptoms they would be experiencing next week," said Murray, a former general practitioner. "It makes it difficult for everybody; it makes it very, very difficult for the patients."

Britain's Office for National Statistics said a survey of 9,063 respondents who tested positive for COVID-19 found that more than 20% reported persistence of some symptoms after five weeks. For about 10% of respondents that included fatigue, while similar numbers reported headaches or loss of taste and smell.

More than 140 million coronavirus infections have been confirmed worldwide to date, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University, meaning even a small percentage of long-term COVID-19 sufferers would suggest millions could be affected.

"That's a lot of extra people to treat and no health care system has got a lot of spare capacity," said Murray. She added that the economic impact of so

many people dropping out of the labor force could be devastating, particularly as many sufferers are women who also shoulder a disproportionate burden at home.

Murray is developing a digital program, funded by Britain's National Institute for Health Research, to treat long-term COVID-19 symptoms and reach more patients faster than through traditional rehab facilities, ensuring they don't feel abandoned by the medical system.

Frommhold said a similar program might help Germany cope with the expected surge in long-term COVID-19 sufferers, but suggested that greater acceptance of the condition will also be necessary for those who don't fully recover.

"In my eyes we first need a campaign like the one there was for HIV awareness, that explains how there are different pathways even after recovery from COVID," she said.

Getting patients, their families and employers to understand that they now have a chronic condition could prevent long haulers from falling into a spiral of depression and anxiety, Frommhold said.

Heike Risch, a 51-year-old kindergarten teacher from the eastern city of Cottbus was hardly able to walk unaided upon leaving the hospital after recovering from COVID-19.

"I felt like I'd aged 30 years in a short period of time," she said.

At the clinic, Risch couldn't balance a table tennis ball on a racket and walk backward. She still can't read a clock properly.

"You don't trust your own body anymore. You don't trust your own head anymore," Risch said.

Still, she hopes to return to work someday. "I like working with children but I need to be able to concentrate. I need to be able to do two things at once occasionally," she said.

Ravera, the nurse, says she has come a long way thanks to the therapy in Heiligendamm and feels lucky to have support from friends and family.

But Ravera doubts she'll go back to doing three-shift weekends at the hospital she worked at in Bavaria.

"You don't know when you'll be well again. The illness comes in waves," she said.

Instead, Ravera is considering using what she learned in rehab to help others who are struggling to breathe properly again after COVID-19.

"It's a bit of a journey into the unknown," she said.

bean island of St. Vincent, unleashed its first big eruption of ash and hot gas April 9, a day after the government ordered people to evacuate homes nearby. Subsequent explosions have followed.

Thousands of people have been living in government shelters, some of which have been struggling to provide basic supplies, and water systems are shut down in many parts of the island.

The UN's resident coordinator for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean said last week that the island was facing "a humanitarian crisis that is growing and may continue for weeks and months." It is happening as St. Vincent and the Grenadines contends with the coronavirus pandemic and the approaching hurricane season.

A Venezuelan navy ship has delivered water and other supplies to St. Vincent,

and Caribbean island nations are sending aid. The UN has released \$1 million from an emergency response fund, according to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' office, and the world body will soon be launching an emergency appeal for money to fund the humanitarian effort and the early phase of recovery for the next six months. (AP)

Endangered lizards hatch: Two endangered Mexican beaded lizards have hatched at the Wrocław Zoo in Poland, boosting the population of the venomous lizards.

The zoo said the lizards, which are difficult to breed in captivity, hatched in late February at the zoo's terrarium, where the eggs had been kept in an incubator since an adult female laid them in August.

Zoo spokeswoman Joanna Kij said Monday that they are still being kept from the public's view and keepers have not yet determined their sex.

In Mexico, the venomous, medium-sized lizards are killed because they are considered very dangerous, and the zoo experts say they only use venom in self-defense. Popular Mexican belief also says they can provoke lightning with their tails.

Adult males can grow to 90 centimeters (35 inches) and weigh up to 4 kilograms (9 pounds).

Three Mexican beaded lizards previously hatched at the zoo in 2016 and were transferred to the Singapore Zoo in 2018. (AP)



A keeper displays one of the two endangered venomous Mexican beaded lizards that hatched in February at an incubator, is seen in Wrocław Zoo, in Wrocław, Poland, April 4. (AP)