

Coronavirus

EU urged to OK COVID pill

Putin tests trial nasal shot against COVID

MOSCOW, Nov 25, (AP) — President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday he has taken an experimental nasal vaccine against the coronavirus, three days after he received his booster shot.

Russia is facing its worst surge of infections and deaths since the pandemic began and is struggling to overcome widespread vaccine hesitancy.

Putin was vaccinated with Sputnik V, Russia's domestically developed COVID-19 vaccine, in the spring. On Sunday, he said he received a booster shot of Sputnik Light, the one-dose version of the jab, and said he wanted to take part in testing the nasal version of Sputnik V.

Denis Logunov, deputy director of Russia's state-funded Gamaleya Center that developed Sputnik V, told Putin on Sunday the nasal vaccine is yet to go through clinical studies and is currently being tested "off-label mostly" — on the center's staff members.

In accordance with established scientific protocols, the vaccine will need to go through several trial phases, including those involving thousands of people, to establish that it is safe and effective to use.

Last month, Russia's Health Ministry gave a regulatory go-ahead to early trials of the nasal form of Sputnik V among 500 volunteers, but it was not immediately clear whether it has already started.

Putin told a government meeting Wednesday that "exactly six months after vaccination my titers of protective (antibodies) have dropped, and specialists recommended the procedure of revaccination, which I did."

He said he didn't experience any unpleasant effects after taking the nasal vaccine.

In recent weeks, Russia has been swept by its highest ever COVID-19 surge, with officials regularly registering record-high numbers of new infections and deaths.

The surge came amid low vaccination rates and lax public attitudes toward taking precautions. Fewer than 40% of Russia's nearly 146 million people have been fully vaccinated, even though the country approved a domestically developed COVID-19 vaccine months before most of the world.

Effectiveness

Russians are currently offered four domestically developed vaccines, with Sputnik V and Sputnik Light dominating the market. Data on efficacy of two other ones, EpiVacCorona and CoviVac, is yet to be released; just like Sputnik V, these two shots have been given regulatory approval before completing late-stage trials necessary to establish their effectiveness in preventing disease.

Russia's Health Ministry is expected to approve a version of Sputnik V for teenagers aged 12 to 17 on Wednesday, Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova told Putin during the government meeting.

According to the Russia's state registry of clinical trials, the jab, which is in essence a smaller dose of Sputnik V, was being tested on more than 3,600 volunteers. No data on its efficacy has been released yet.

The immunization drive in Russia has been hampered by widespread vaccine hesitancy. A poll released by the independent pollster Levada Center earlier this month showed that 45% of Russians weren't willing to get domestically developed shots.

In an effort to boost vaccine uptake, doctors from 11 Russian hospitals released an open letter Wednesday, inviting those skeptical of vaccines — and a number of prominent public figures in particular who are known to air their skepticism in public — to visit coronavirus wards and intensive care units with COVID-19 patients.

"Maybe after that you'll change your mind and fewer people will be dying," the letter read.

Russia's state coronavirus task force reported 33,558 new infections on Wednesday and 1,240 deaths. Golikova called the daily mortality numbers "dramatic," noting at the same time that contagions in the country have taken a downward trend.

In total, the task force has reported over 9.4 million confirmed infections and more than 267,000 COVID-19 deaths, by far the highest death toll in Europe. Some experts believe the true figure is even higher.

Reports by Russia's statistical service, Rosstat, that tally coronavirus-linked deaths retroactively, reveal much higher mortality. They say 462,000 people with COVID-19 died between April 2020 and September of this year.

Russian officials have said the task force only includes deaths for which COVID-19 was the main cause, and uses data from medical facilities. Rosstat uses wider criteria for counting virus-related deaths and takes its numbers from civil registry offices where registering a death is finalized.

Meanwhile, the European Medicines Agency said it has received a request from Merck to authorize its coronavirus antiviral, the first pill shown to treat COVID-19.

In a statement Tuesday, the EU drug regulator said it had started evaluating molnupiravir, made by Merck and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics, and that a decision could be made within weeks on whether it might be cleared.

Last week, the EMA issued emergency advice saying that molnupiravir could be used to treat adults infected with the coronavirus who don't yet need extra oxygen and are at increased risk of developing severe disease.

The agency said the drug should be given as soon as possible after COVID-19 has been diagnosed and within five days of symptoms starting. It is intended to be taken twice a day for five days.

Earlier this month, Britain became the first country in the world to OK the drug. The UK licensed molnupiravir for adults diagnosed with COVID-19 and with at least one risk factor for severe disease.

An antiviral pill that reduces symptoms and speeds recovery could prove groundbreaking, easing caseloads on hospitals and helping to curb explosive outbreaks in conjunction with vaccination campaigns.

Europe is now at the epicenter of the pandemic and the World Health Organization has warned that without urgent measures, Europe could see 700,000 more COVID-19 deaths by the spring. Molnupiravir is also pending review with regulators in the US, which is expected to convene an expert panel later this month to consider authorization.

Even if the pill is licensed, initial supplies will be limited. Merck has said it can produce 10 million treatment courses this year, but much of that supply has already been purchased by governments worldwide.

Also:

LONDON: Prince Charles praised Cambridge as a center of scientific collaboration Tuesday as the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca opened a 1 billion-pound (\$1.34 billion) research center, hoping to build on work in developing one of the first COVID-19 vaccines.

The 19,000 square-meter (more than 200,000 square-foot) complex near the University of Cambridge will house more than 2,200 research scientists. It joins a cluster of businesses seeking to make Cambridge a hub for life sciences research similar to what California's Silicon Valley is for the technology industry.

"Having myself studied at Cambridge ... over 50 years ago now, one of the things which I have always found so special about this city is how it attracts the meeting of minds, sparks unique cross-disciplinary conversations and nurtures collaboration and ingenuity," Charles said at the official opening.

The Cambridge life sciences cluster includes 631 companies that employ almost 21,000 people and generate annual revenue of 7 billion pounds, according to Cambridge Ahead, which promotes business development in the city.



In this photo provided by the Roscosmos Space Agency Press Service, the Soyuz rocket blasts off from the launch pad at Russia's space facility in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, Wednesday, Nov. 24. A Russian rocket blasted off successfully on Wednesday to deliver a new docking module to the International Space Station. (AP)

New Russian module launched to International Space Station

A Russian rocket blasted off successfully on Wednesday to deliver a new docking module to the International Space Station.

The Soyuz rocket lifted off as scheduled at 6:06 p.m. (13:06 GMT) from the Russian launch facility in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, carrying the Progress cargo ship with the Prichal (Pier) docking module attached to it.

The craft successfully entered a designated orbit

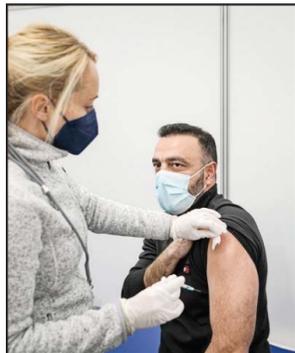
nine minutes after the launch and is set to dock at the station on Friday, hooking up to the new Russian Nauka (Science) laboratory module that was added to the station in July.

The new spherical module with six docking ports will allow potential future expansion of the Russian segment of the station.

Earlier this week, Russian crew on the station

started training for Prichal's arrival, simulating the use of manual controls in case the automatic docking system fails.

The space outpost is currently operated by NASA astronauts Raja Chari, Thomas Marshburn, Kayla Barron, and Mark Vande Hei; Russian cosmonauts Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov; and Matthias Maurer of the European Space Agency. (AP)



A man gets his vaccination at a vaccination Drive-in center in Cologne, Germany, Nov. 23. Germany battles rising numbers of coronavirus infections as a general COVID-19 vaccine requirement is widely discussed. (AP)



Eller



Pearson

Discovery

Plan to bury coal ash OK'd: Regulators have given approval to a plan by the Tennessee Valley Authority to bury toxin-laden coal ash in southeast Memphis.

The federal utility received final approval from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation last week, a spokeswoman for the state agency told The Commercial Appeal on Tuesday.

TVA plans to have a contractor remove tons of coal ash from ponds in southwest Memphis and transport them along Shelby Drive to a landfill and bury it in lined pits to prevent leaching into the ground.

"We continue to collaborate with our partners — (Memphis, Light Gas and Water, the City of Memphis, the Memphis and Shelby County Port Authority and Shelby County) — on addressing this shared responsibility," TVA spokesman Buddy Eller said. He did not say when removal would start.

The ash has been stored in two unlined ponds near the old Allen Fossil Plant above the Memphis Sand aquifer, the region's drinking water supply, for years.

In 2017, high levels of arsenic, lead and fluoride were found in monitoring wells at Allen, sparking fears that the aquifer that supplies Memphis' drinking water could become tainted.

Testing has since deemed the public water supply unaffected. But a report released by the utility also showed a connection between the shallow aquifer where toxins were found and the deeper Memphis Sand Aquifer that provides the city's slightly sweet-tasting drinking water.

Justin J. Pearson, co-founder of Memphis Community Against Pollution, supports the removal of the coal ash but criticized the approval and the way TVA conducted the public feedback. (AP)

Lahore world's most polluted city:

A thick cloud of smog that enveloped Pakistan's cultural capital on Wednesday has earned it the ignominious title of the world's most polluted city, according to a Swiss air quality monitoring company.

Platform IQAir said that Lahore now stands at the top of its polluted cities ranking — with an air quality index of 203 on the US AQI scale, versus runner-up Delhi, India, with 183. That standing was at 0949 GMT; the two cities had traded places at least once over the course of the morning.

Increasing smog and particle-laden air has sickened thousands of people with respiratory and other illnesses, forcing many to stay at home on particularly dirty days like Wednesday.

Dhaka, Bangladesh came in third,

with an index of 169, and Kolkata, India at fourth, with a reading of 168. Lahore stood at third place a day earlier.

Lahore was once known as the city of gardens, which were ubiquitous during the Mughal era of the 16th to



A mother takes care of her son who is suffering from dengue fever, a mosquito-borne disease, in a hospital, in Karachi, Pakistan, Monday, Nov. 22. Pakistani health officials are battling dengue fever outbreaks across the country as hospitals continued to receive scores of patients, putting strain on the poor emergency services, local media reported. (AP)

Coronavirus

WHO Europe warns of possible surge in COVID deaths

Germany crosses 100,000 COVID deaths

BERLIN, Nov 25, (AP) — Official figures released Thursday show Germany has become the latest country to surpass 100,000 deaths from COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

Germany's disease control agency said it recorded 351 additional deaths in connection with the coronavirus over the past 24 hours, taking the total toll to 100,119.

In Europe, Germany is the fifth country to pass that mark, after Russia, the United Kingdom, Italy and France.

The Robert Koch Institute, a federal agency that collects data from some 400 regional health offices, said Germany also set a record for daily confirmed cases — 75,961 in a 24-hour period. Since the start of the outbreak, Germany has had more than 5.57 million confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The surge in cases prompted Germany's government-in-waiting on Wednesday to announce the creation of a new permanent expert group to advise officials on how to tackle the pandemic.

While the number of daily infections is higher than that seen during the last winter surge, there are currently fewer daily deaths per confirmed case. Experts argue this is because of vaccinations, which they say reduces the likelihood of serious illness.

Still, hospitals have warned that intensive care beds are running out, with almost 4,000 already occupied by COVID-19 patients. Some hospitals in the country's south and east have begun transferring patients to other regions.

The general manager of the Bavarian hospitals association, Roland Engehausen, said the number of new cases needs to come down sharply.

"Otherwise we're going to have a dramatic situation between Christmas and New Year's the likes of which we haven't seen yet," he told German news agency dpa.

Saxony, to the northeast, became the first German state to record a

weekly number of confirmed cases above 1,000 per 100,000 inhabitants Thursday. It has the lowest vaccination rate — at 57.9% — among Germany's 16 states.

The government has urged people who were vaccinated more than six months ago to get boosters, and those who haven't been inoculated at all yet to get their first shot. Officials say 68.1% of Germany's 83 million inhabitants are fully vaccinated, far below the minimum level of 75% the government has aimed for.

Center-left leader Olaf Scholz, who is poised to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor next month, called Wednesday for mandatory vaccinations in nursing homes that care for particularly vulnerable people — and left open the possibility of extending the measure to others.

"Vaccinations are the way out of this pandemic," Scholz said. His Social Democratic Party's health expert Karl Lauterbach, a trained epidemiologist, cited the case of Bayern Munich soccer star Joshua Kimmich as a cautionary tale for those who believe they can avoid both the virus and the vaccine. Kimmich, who had hesitated to get the shot, tested positive this week. Bayern said Wednesday that Kimmich was "doing well."

Protection

"The case shows how difficult it is for unvaccinated people to avoid COVID these days," Lauterbach said on Twitter.

The World Health Organization's Europe office says projections show its 53-country region could face another 700,000 deaths in the coronavirus pandemic by next spring, topping 2 million in total.

WHO Europe, which is based in Copenhagen, Denmark, also cited growing evidence of a decline in protection against infection and mild disease through vaccines, and said a "booster dose" should be given as a priority to the most vulnerable populations — including people with weakened immune systems —

as well as people over age 60 and health care workers.

The UN health agency's international headquarters in Geneva, however, has repeatedly called for a moratorium on the use of boosters through year-end so that doses can be made available for many developing countries that have faced a severe lack of the COVID-19 vaccines compared to the rich world.

WHO Europe called on people to get vaccinated and respect proper hygiene and practice social distancing to help stop the spread of the virus.

"Today, the COVID-19 situation across Europe and Central Asia is very serious. We face a challenging winter ahead, but we should not be without hope, because all of us — governments, health authorities, individuals — can take decisive action to stabilize the pandemic," said Dr. Kluge, the regional director for WHO Europe, in a statement.

The European region, which stretches deep into central Asia, reported that deaths due to COVID-19 rose to nearly 4,200 per day last week — a doubling of levels recorded at the end of September. Cumulative deaths have now reached 1.5 million in the region.

The three factors driving the increase are the highly transmissible delta variant of the virus, an easing of restrictive measures like requirements for mask-wearing and physical distancing in places, and large swaths of the European population that remain unvaccinated, WHO Europe said.

"We can expect that there will be high or extreme stress on hospital beds in 25 countries, and high or extreme stress in intensive care units (ICUs) in 49 out of 53 countries between now and 1 March 2022," a WHO Europe statement said. "Cumulative reported deaths are projected to reach over 2.2 million by spring next year, based on current trends."

It said the region could face a cumulative 2 million deaths due to the pandemic by March 1.

19th centuries. Intense urbanization and surging population growth have left little room for greenery across the city, Pakistan's second largest after the capital Karachi.

Doctors are advising people to wear face masks to avoid respiratory related diseases. (AP)

Oregon-born gray wolf dies: An Oregon-born gray wolf that thrilled biologists as it journeyed far south into California was found dead after apparently being struck by a vehicle, authorities said Wednesday.

No foul play was suspected in the death of the male wolf known as OR93, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife said in a news release. Gray wolves are listed as endangered in California, where they were wiped out by the 1920s.

"Before his demise, he was documented traveling the farthest south in California since wolves returned to the state, which is historically wolf habitat. The last documented wolf that far south was captured in San Bernardino County in 1922," the department said.

A truck driver reported spotting the dead wolf on Nov. 10 near the Kern County town of Lebec, about 75 miles (120 kilometers) northwest of downtown Los Angeles. (AP)