

Coronavirus

EU eyes Pfizer jabs

Blocking 'seats' on plane cuts virus risk

NEW YORK, April 15, (AP): A new study says leaving middle seats open could give airline passengers more protection from the virus that causes COVID-19.

Researchers said the risk of passengers being exposed to the virus from an infected person on the plane could be reduced by 23% to 57% if middle seats are empty, compared with a full flight.

The study released Wednesday supports the response of airlines that limited seating early in the pandemic. However, all US airlines except Delta now sell every seat they can, and Delta will stop blocking middle seats on May 1.

The airlines argue that filters and air-flow systems on most planes make them safe when passengers wear face masks, as they are now required to do by federal regulation.

Researchers at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention which is headed by **Rochelle P. Walensky** and Kansas State University estimated how far airborne virus particles travel inside a plane. They used mannequins that emitted aerosol to measure the flow of virus particles through airline cabin mock-ups.

The study, however, did not take into account the wearing of face masks because it was based on a previous study done in 2017, before the pandemic.

Nor did it consider whether passengers are vaccinated against COVID-19. The CDC says vaccinated people can travel at low risk to themselves, although the agency still recommends against nonessential travel.

Airlines for America, a trade group for the largest US carriers, said airlines use several layers of measures to prevent the spread of the virus on planes, including face masks, asking passengers about their health, and stepped-up cleaning of cabins. The group cited a Harvard University report funded by the airline industry as showing that the risk of transmitting the coronavirus on planes is very low.

Limited

Airlines were divided last year over filling middle seats. While Delta, Southwest, Alaska and JetBlue limited seating on planes, United Airlines never did and American Airlines only blocked seats for a short time. It was mostly an academic question, because relatively few flights last year were crowded. That is changing.

More than 1 million travelers have gone through US airports each day for the past month. While that is still down more than one-third from the same period in 2019, more flights now are crowded. Around Easter weekend, Delta temporarily filled middle seats to accommodate passengers whose original flights were canceled because of staffing shortages.

Meanwhile, in a stinging rebuke to pharma giant AstraZeneca Wednesday, the European Union announced plans to negotiate a massive contract extension for Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine insisting the 27-nation bloc had to go with companies that had shown their value in the pandemic.

"We need to focus on technologies that have proven their worth," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. She also announced that America's Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech would provide the EU with an extra 50 million doses in the 2nd quarter of this year, making up for faltering deliveries of AstraZeneca.

In contrast to the oft-criticized Anglo-Swedish company, von der Leyen said Pfizer-BioNTech "has proven to be a reliable partner. It has delivered on its commitments, and it is responsive to our needs. This is to the immediate benefit of EU citizens."

Exacerbating the problems for AstraZeneca, Denmark decided Wednesday not to resume use of its vaccine, after putting it on hold last month following reports of rare blood clots in some recipients. The bulk of the shots given in the Scandinavian country so far have been the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The Johnson & Johnson jab, which uses the same base technology as AstraZeneca, hit a snag this week when U.S. regulators recommended a "pause" in administering Johnson & Johnson shots. Deliveries in the EU have been suspended.

AstraZeneca was supposed to be the workhorse of the EU's vaccine drive this year - a cheap and easy-to-transport shot to break the pandemic's back. Yet, the EU said that of 120 million doses promised for the 1st quarter, only 30 million were delivered, and, of the 180 million expected, now there are only 70 million set for delivery in the 2nd quarter.

Because of that shortfall, the EU has come under crushing pressure as, even though it is a major producer and exporter of vaccines, it cannot get its vaccinations even close to the levels of the United Kingdom and the United States.

Compared

The Our World in Data site said 47.5% of people in the UK have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 36.6% in the US and 16.4% in the EU.

Now, Pfizer-BioNTech could well become the key to beat the pandemic on the continent.

With 200 million doses already earmarked for the bloc this quarter from Pfizer-BioNTech, the 50 million additional deliveries will be especially welcomed by the EU's nations considering supply delays and concerns over rare blood clots potentially linked to the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

Von der Leyen said the EU will start negotiating to buy 1.8 billion doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine through 2023.

"It will entail that not only the production of the vaccines, but also all essential components, will be based in the EU," von der Leyen said.

The European Commission currently has a portfolio of 2.3 billion doses from half a dozen companies and is negotiating more contracts.

Von der Leyen expressed full confidence in the technology used for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which is different from that behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

The active ingredient in the Pfizer-BioNTech shot is messenger RNA, or mRNA, which contains the instructions for human cells to construct a harmless piece of the coronavirus called the spike protein. The human immune system recognizes the spike protein as foreign, allowing it to mount a response against the virus upon infection.

AstraZeneca's is made with a cold virus that sneaks the spike protein gene into the body. It's a very different form of manufacturing: Living cells in giant bioreactors grow that cold virus, which is extracted and purified.

Von der Leyen said Europe needs to have a technology that can boost immunity, tackle new variants and produce shots quickly and massively. "mRNA vaccines are a clear case in point," she said.

The planned negotiations with Pfizer left in the middle what the EU would do about any new contracts with AstraZeneca. "Other contracts, with other companies, may follow," said von der Leyen.



Walensky



In this Feb. 2, 2021 file photo, a patient suffering from COVID-19 communicates with nurses by pointing to an alphabet in the ICU at the La Timone hospital in Marseille. France is expected Thursday April 15, to pass the grim milestone of 100,000 COVID-19 deaths, after a year of hospital tensions, on-and-off lockdowns and personal loss that have left families nationwide grieving the pandemic's unending, devastating toll. (AP)

Coronavirus

Officials seek evidence

J&J vaccine to remain in limbo

NEW YORK, April 15, (AP): Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine will remain in limbo for a while longer after government health advisers declared Wednesday that they need more evidence to decide if a handful of unusual blood clots were linked to the shot - and if so, how big the risk really is.

The reports are exceedingly rare - six cases out of more than 7 million US inoculations with the one-dose vaccine. But the government recommended a pause in J&J vaccinations this week, not long after European regulators declared that such clots are a rare but possible risk with the AstraZeneca vaccine, a shot made in a similar way but not yet approved for use in the US.

At an emergency meeting, advisers to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention wrestled with the fact that the US has enough alternative shots to vaccinate its population but other countries anxiously awaiting the one-and-done vaccine may not.

"I continue to feel like we're in a race against time and the variants, but we need to (move forward) in the safest possible way," said CDC adviser Dr. Grace Lee of Stanford University, who was among those seeking to postpone a vote on the vaccine.

Authorities have studied the clots for only a few days and have little information to judge the shot, agreed fellow adviser Dr. Beth Bell of the University of Washington.

"I don't want to send the message there is something fundamentally wrong with this vaccine," Bell said. "It's a very rare event. Nothing in life is risk-free. But I want to be able to understand and defend the decision I've made based on a reasonable amount of data."

These are not run-of-the-mill blood clots. They occurred in unusual places, in veins that drain blood from the brain, and in people with abnormally low levels of clot-forming platelets. The six cases raised an alarm bell because that number is at least three times more than experts would have expected to see even of more typical brain-drainage clots, said CDC's Dr. Tom Shimabukuro.

"What we have here is a picture of clots forming in large vessels where we have low platelets," Shimabukuro explained. "This usually doesn't happen," but it's similar to European reports with the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The good news: The government says there are no signs of similar clots after vaccination with the Pfizer and Moderna shots that are the mainstay of the COVID-19 fight in the US.

The J&J cases now under investigation are all among women younger than 50. But the advisory panel stressed that there's not enough information to tell if only certain groups would be at risk. In Europe, most but not all cases following AstraZeneca vaccinations have been among women under 60, leading different countries to use that vaccine in varying ways.

Experienced

Also, a 25-year-old man experienced a similar clot during US testing of J&J's vaccine, something the government scrutinized at the time but could not link to the shot. On Wednesday, the company also brought to the CDC's attention a woman whose clot did not occur in the brain, sparking more questions about what other evidence to examine.

The CDC expects its advisers to reconsider the evidence within two weeks. So far the clots have occurred between one and three weeks after people received the J&J vaccine, and officials cautioned that more reports could surface.

The clot concerns could undermine public confidence in a vaccine many hoped would help some of the hardest-to-reach populations - in poor countries or in places like homeless shelters in the US.

But the US has intensive monitoring for COVID-19 vaccines, since side effects too rare to have occurred in studies of thousands of people sometimes pop up once shots are used in millions. Shimabukuro said spotting such a rare potential risk amid the nation's huge vaccine rollout "is an example of a success story for vaccine safety."

Some vaccine specialists who were

closely watching the deliberations expressed dismay that the public - here and abroad - will have to wait for more advice.

"What they did was they punted," said Dr. Paul Offit, a vaccine expert at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "I just don't think waiting is going to give you a critical amount of information that is going to help you make a decision."

He noted that many European countries are dealing with the AstraZeneca uncertainty without stopping its use.

Health officials recommended the J&J timeout in part to make sure doctors know how to recognize and treat the unusual condition. The CDC said Wednesday that four of the six women with the unusual clots were treated with a blood thinner named heparin - a treatment the government is warning doctors to avoid.

The setback for J&J comes as the worldwide death toll from COVID-19 approaches 3 million, including more than 560,000 who perished in the U.S., which continues to report tens of thousands of new infections every day and an average of almost 1,000 deaths.

So far, the J&J vaccine has been a minor player in US vaccinations. More than 122 million Americans have received at least one vaccine dose, and nearly 23% are fully vaccinated. Moderna and Pfizer are on track to have delivered 300 million doses each by mid- to late July.

Vaccinations are slower in Europe, where many countries have struggled for supply. J&J delayed some of its European deliveries amid the clot evaluation, but Poland said it would use the batch it already has in hand, European medical regulators plan to issue their own evaluation of the J&J clot issue next week.

When the clots were spotted after AstraZeneca vaccinations, scientists in Norway and Germany raised the possibility that some people are experiencing an abnormal immune response, forming antibodies that disable their platelets. That's the theory as the U.S. now investigates the J&J reports.



In this photo provided by the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, a tiger cub roams in an exhibit as 3 cubs made their public debut on Wednesday, April 14, at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo in Cleveland. (AP)



Bezos



Trebucq

Discovery

Mock crew 'test' space capsule: Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin company strapped two employees into a fueled rocketship for practice, but pulled them out shortly before sending the capsule to the edge of space Wednesday with only a test dummy.

The crew rehearsal in West Texas brings Blue Origin closer to launching tourists and others into space.

Blue Origin wanted to see how well a crew could get in and out of the capsule. The pretend astronauts also tested seatbelts and radio links before the 10-minute flight, and went back to the capsule following touchdown to climb aboard for recovery practice.

"While there are no astronauts on board today, that was a critical step toward our march toward first human flight," flight commentator Ariane Cornell said from company headquarters in Kent, Washington. The company is "very close" to flying passengers, she noted.

Blue Origin's goal is to take paying customers on short hops providing three minutes of weightlessness. Windows make up one-third of the six-seat capsule.

It was the 15th flight of a New Shepard rocket, named after the first American in space, Alan Shepard. The capsule reached an altitude of 66 miles (106 kilometers), just above the official border of space.

The reusable booster landed upright seven minutes after liftoff. The capsule touched down under parachutes about three minutes later.

Before the flight, four mock astronauts made the two-mile drive to the launch pad and climbed up the tower. But only two - a company lawyer and a senior program director - crawled into the capsule. (AP)

Tiger sharks eat whale carcass: Officials are warning people to stay out of the water after sharks were seen eating the carcass of a whale that has washed ashore on an Oahu beach.

Several tiger sharks were seen eating the whale remains as it drifted closer to shore in Waimanalo, Hawaii News Now reported Tuesday. The carcass landed on the beach later in the day, but warning signs remained Wednesday.

Honolulu Ocean Safety Division Lt. David Loui took a jet ski out to the carcass as sharks ate chunks of the whale.

"One of the sharks, probably about 12 feet, was actively coming to the jet ski craft and almost making lunges toward it, and basically trying to scare us off," Loui said. People came to the beach to see the rare sight.

"We've just been hanging out, kind of watching it, looking at what it looks like, looking at the tiger bites on it," said

Sammy Falgiani of Honolulu. Only about 20 dead whales and dolphins wash ashore on US soil around the Pacific each year, said Nicholas Hofmann, training coordinator of the Health and Stranding LAB at University of Hawaii. (AP)

Humanitarian crisis feared: Ongoing volcanic eruptions have displaced about 20% of people in the eastern Caribbean island of St. Vincent as a UN official on Wednesday warned of a growing humanitarian crisis.

Between 16,000 to 20,000 people were evacuated under government orders before La Soufriere volcano first erupted on Friday, covering the lush green island with ash that continues to blanket communities in St. Vincent as well as Barbados and other nearby islands.

About 6,000 of those evacuees are

considered most vulnerable, said **Didier Trebucq**, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean.

"So we are facing a situation with a great deal of uncertainty, and also a humanitarian crisis that is growing and may continue for weeks and months," he said.

Trebucq said that based on certain information and preliminary estimations, 20,000 people are "estimated at risk of food insecurity, given the loss of the assets in terms of livelihood like fisheries, or agriculture." Some 4,000 people are temporarily living in 87 government shelters, while others have relocated to hotels or the homes of friends and family, officials said. Trebucq noted that many shelters are lacking basic services including drinking water.

He said priority number one is water,



In this image from video made available by Blue Origin, the New Shepard rocket lifts off during a test in West Texas on Wednesday, April 14. (AP)

which is being transported from nearby Caribbean nations and other contributors since water systems shut down in many parts of the island.

He said priority number two is meeting the needs of the 4,000 people in shelters, including cots and basic supplies, sanitation, hygiene and emergency latrines.

"We are dealing with a crisis within the COVID crisis," Trebucq told reporters at UN headquarters in New York in a video briefing. "Many health facilities have been affected by the ashes." (AP)

Tiger cubs make public debut: Cubs from two subspecies of endangered tigers made their public debut on Wednesday at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo.

Amur tiger cubs named Luka and Anya were born at the zoo in December. A Malayan tiger cub named Indrah was also born in December at a zoo in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Raising the two subspecies together will help them develop after their mothers would not care for them, zoo officials said. Indrah was brought to Cleveland after a recommendation from the Tiger Species Survival Plan.

Amur tigers, also known as Siberian tigers, are found in the far east of Russia and northeast China and are considered endangered. Malayan tigers are found in the Malaysian peninsula and are critically endangered.

Only a few hundred animals for both species remain in their native regions, zoo officials said. The cubs weigh about 30 pounds (13.6 kilograms) each and have transitioned to a meat diet.

Zoo visitors can see the tigers between 10 a.m. and noon daily as they transition to their habitat. (AP)