Minister for Health announces the allocation strategy for COVID-19 vaccines

From Department of Health

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Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly TD, has today announced the allocation strategy for COVID-19 vaccines, following sign-off from Cabinet.

The strategy prioritises those over the age of 65 living in long-term care facilities, frontline healthcare workers who are in direct patient contact and those aged 70 and over.

The Minister also announced that there should be no barrier to people accessing a vaccine, and therefore the vaccine programme will be available free of charge to everyone in Ireland.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy was based on a Department of Health and National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) paper. It sets out a provisional priority list of groups for vaccination once a safe and effective vaccine(s) has received authorisation from the European Medicines Agency (EMA). This paper was endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) on 3 December.

The Minister for Health said:

"Recent news from vaccine developers are a beacon of hope after a very difficult year. Vaccination is a hugely effective intervention for saving lives and promoting good health. Of course, the safety and effectiveness of vaccines is our absolute priority and any COVID-19 vaccine administered in Ireland will have to be authorised by the European Medicines Agency. While we await news on whether these vaccines comply with all of the EMA’s requirements of quality, safety and efficacy, the government has been working ahead on plans for the roll-out of vaccines.

"A key part of the roll-out will be ensuring that those most vulnerable to COVID-19 receive vaccinations first. Given the country’s experience with COVID-19 to date and the risks that vulnerable people and those in frontline roles in the health and social care services continue to face, it is only right that they are prioritised in the allocation of vaccines. The government has followed the advice from our leading medical experts."

Though Ireland has secured large number of doses of candidate vaccines, the initial availability will be limited if authorised for use, therefore a prioritisation strategy had to be developed.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy prioritises groups based on (1) ethical principles and (2) epidemiological considerations, and takes account of the current distinctive
characteristics of the COVID-19 disease, its modes of transmission, the groups and individuals most susceptible to infection and what is currently known about the candidate vaccines. The Strategy will evolve and adapt with more detailed information on the vaccines and their effectiveness.

The Minister advised that the continued adherence to public health measures is critical to keeping the disease at bay. We will still need to protect each other by continuing to wash our hands, cover our sneezes, avoid crowded places, physically distance, and wear face coverings.

He said:

"While some may be tempted to let their guards down now that there are vaccines on the horizon, it is crucially important to continue to follow the public health guidance. COVID-19 is still a deadly disease. Through so much hard work and sacrifice, we now have the lowest 14-day incidence rate of COVID-19 in the EU. We are in a good position, and we want to keep it like that. Please remember that every single contact counts."

ENDS

Notes

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy is available to read in full.

The planning and implementation of a COVID-19 immunisation programme, if/when a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine becomes available, is being undertaken as a matter of urgency.

The Allocation Framework was developed to consider how to prioritise different groups. It is based on (1) ethical principles and (2) epidemiological considerations, and takes account of the current and evolving understanding of distinctive characteristics of COVID-19 disease, its modes of transmission, the groups and individuals most susceptible to infection and the characteristics of the candidate vaccines.

The Allocation Framework combines ethical principles as well as equitable access with prioritisation for those most in need.

Four core ethical principles, namely, the moral equality of all people, minimisation of harm, fairness, and reciprocity provide a guide for prioritisation for vaccination.

This is a first iteration of the allocation strategy; it will be adapted as more data and evidence emerges over time on vaccine effectiveness and the epidemiology of the disease. Scientists and clinicians will continue to play a key role in determining the ongoing evolution of vaccine prioritisation to ensure their optimum use from a public health perspective.

The government is committed to the timely implementation of a COVID-19 immunisation programme, as soon as one or more vaccines in the EU portfolio are approved for use. In this regard, a cross-Government High-Level Taskforce has been established to support and oversee the development and implementation of the programme.
The overall Strategy and Implementation Plan under development through the High-Level Taskforce will be brought by the Minister for Health for consideration of Government shortly.

The current companies that Advanced Purchase Agreements (APAs) have been entered into with are:

- **Pfizer/BioNtech** 2.3m
- **AstraZeneca/OU** 3.3m
- **Janssen J&J** 2.2m
- **CureVac** To be confirmed
- **Moderna** 0.88m