

Suppression and Vaccination - Significant developments in Ireland's COVID-19 response: Statement from Dr. Tony Holohan, Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health

From [Department of Health](#)

Published on 6 February 2021

Last updated on 8 February 2021

On January 30th 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Since that time, COVID-19 has had a significant effect on Ireland's public health. The measures we have had to take individually and collectively to protect against further transmission have had a major impact on each one of us and on the wider social and economic functioning of the whole country. But we have hope for a different future in which vaccines are a key part of our public health response. Vaccines will help to protect against the severe effects of SARS-CoV-2 virus and protect the most vulnerable in our population. In time we are hopeful that the evidence will show that they also help to prevent people who have this infection from passing it on to other people.

It is beyond any expectations we had when the first case of this infection was reported in Ireland on 29 February last, that within one year we would have multiple vaccines developed, tested and being made available to our population. It is an immense scientific and public health achievement.

Last week, the European Medicines Agency authorised a third vaccine, made by AstraZeneca, for distribution. This is in addition to the first two vaccines manufactured by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna of which more than 220,000 doses have been administered in Ireland. Unlike AstraZeneca, these are mRNA vaccines so called because of the manner in which they work. More vaccines will be authorised in the coming weeks and months, providing us with further options for protection against COVID-19.

Following the authorisation of the AstraZeneca vaccine, I asked the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) led by Professor Karina Butler to provide advice on the use of this vaccine in older adults and to consider the appropriate time interval between the first and second doses. Based on their advice, I recommended to the Minister for Health that we provide only the mRNA vaccines - Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna - to people over the age of 70. This is because trials of both Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines showed higher efficacy overall including among older adults. Data on efficacy among older adults with AstraZeneca vaccine is lacking at this time.

People over the age of 70 are the next group of people in the prioritisation schedule agreed by Government. They are the most vulnerable to the disease, and they have had to shoulder the greatest burden of ill health, hospitalisation and mortality during this pandemic. It is also important that we recognise that they have been isolating themselves for extensive periods of time during the last year. It is a matter of great importance that we as a country can now offer the vaccines we believe to be most effective to the people who are most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 i.e. those aged over 70.

We are in a strong position. Thanks to the efforts of the population in staying home, limiting contacts and following public health advice there has been a substantial decrease in disease incidence and we can see that we are suppressing this third wave of COVID-19 infection faster than any other country in Europe.

It is very important that we keep this up. With a daily case number in excess of 1,000 we know we need to make more progress with the measures that Government has mandated until 5 March.

It is especially important that those who have been vaccinated keep following the same advice as everyone else because we don't yet have enough good evidence that vaccination can stop them spreading the infection.

Please continue to stay safe and follow public health advice and we will get through this pandemic together.