

Scientists ask: Without trial data, how can we trust Russia's COVID vaccine?



A small bottle labeled with a "Vaccine" sticker is held near a medical syringe in front of displayed "Coronavirus COVID-19" words in this illustration
Reuters | London

An announcement by Russia yesterday that it will approve a COVID-19 vaccine after less than two months of human testing prompted alarm among global health experts, who said that with no full trial data, the vaccine is hard to trust.

Intent on being first in the global race to develop a vaccine against the pandemic disease, Russia has yet to conduct large-scale trials of the shot that would produce data to show whether it works - something immunologists and infectious disease experts say could be a "reckless" step.

"Russia is essentially conducting a large population level experiment," said Ayfer Ali, a specialist in drug research at Britain's Warwick Business School.

She said such a super-fast approval could mean that potential adverse effects of a vaccine may not be picked up. These, while likely to be rare, could be serious, she warned.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the vaccine, developed by Moscow's Gamaleya Institute, was safe and that it had been administered to one of his daughters.

"I know that it works quite effectively, forms strong immunity, and I repeat, it has passed all the needed checks," Putin said on state television.

Francois Balloux, an expert at University College London's Genetics Institute, said it was "a reckless and foolish decision".

"Mass vaccination with an improperly tested vaccine is unethical," he said. "Any problem with the Russian vaccination campaign would be disastrous both through its negative effects on health, but also because it would further set back the acceptance of vaccines in the population."

Scientific papers

Even as Russia declared victory, more than half a dozen drugmakers around the world are in the process of conducting large-scale, advanced human trials of their potential COVID-19 vaccines, each with tens of thousands of volunteer participants.

Several of these frontrunners, including Moderna, Pfizer and AstraZeneca, say they hope to know if their vaccines work and are safe by the end of this year.

All are expected to publish their trial results and safety data and submit them to reg-

ulators in the United States, Europe and elsewhere for scrutiny before any licence could be granted.

The Russian vaccine's approval by the Health Ministry comes before trials that would normally involve thousands of participants, commonly known as a Phase III trial. Such trials are usually considered essential precursors for a vaccine to secure regulatory approval.

20 states request one bln COVID-19 vaccine doses, says Russia

Tass | Moscow

Russia has received a request for the production of 1 bln doses of the COVID-19 vaccine produced by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology from 20 states, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund Kirill Dmitriev said during an online conference.

According to Dmitriev, several Latin American, Middle Eastern and Asian states have expressed an interest in purchasing the Russian vaccine.

News in brief

Coronavirus found on frozen seafood in China

Authorities in China have found the novel coronavirus on the packaging of imported frozen seafood that arrived from the port city of Dalian, which recently battled a surge of cases, a local government said yesterday. The virus was found on the outer packaging of frozen seafood bought by three companies in Yantai, a port city in eastern Shandong province. The Yantai city government said in a statement the seafood was from an imported shipment that landed at Dalian but did not say where it originated.

Goods imported from Hong Kong must be marked "Made in China" to be sold in the United States as part of Washington's punitive response to a sweeping clampdown on the city, US customs authorities were set to announce. Last month, President Donald Trump retaliated to Beijing's imposition of a tough new security law in Hong Kong by removing special trading privileges for the financial hub, which in 2018 sold goods worth \$6.3 billion to the United States.

Hong Kong imports to be labelled 'Made in China': US customs

Britain says it is working with France on blocking migrant route

President Emmanuel Macron's government agreed the high numbers making the illegal crossing were unacceptable. "It's clear more needs to be done," Philp told reporters in Paris after meeting French officials.

Britain and France will work "at pace" to finalise a new plan for shutting down a migrant route across the Channel, British immigration minister Chris Philp said yesterday. Philp said

Modi urges ramped up testing and tracing to beat coronavirus

India's ability to rein in a surging coronavirus outbreak hinges on its 10 most populous states, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday, urging regional leaders to ramp up testing and contact tracing. India has more than 2.2 million confirmed coronavirus infections, the third highest tally after the United States and Brazil. "If we can defeat corona in these 10 states, the country will win," Modi said in a video conference with state chief ministers. The 10 states accounted for 80 percent of its 639,929 active cases and 82 percent of its 45,257 deaths, Modi said.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has lauded Russia's efforts to develop a coronavirus vaccine and is willing to personally participate in trials, as he welcomed a supply offer from Moscow that he expects will be free of charge. "I will tell President (Vladimir) Putin that I have huge trust in your studies in combating COVID and I believe that the vaccine that you have produced is really good for humanity," Duterte said late yesterday.

Philippines' Duterte has 'huge trust' in Russia vaccine, volunteers for trial



Experts said the lack of published data on Russia's vaccine - including how it is made and details on safety, immune response and whether can prevent COVID-19 infection - leaves scientists, health authorities and the public in the dark.



Singapore crushes ivory from around 300 elephants

The crushing process may take several days and the fragments will then be incinerated.

Reuters | Singapore

Singapore started crushing nine tonnes worth of elephant ivory on Tuesday, in what authorities said was the biggest such event globally in recent years and signalled the island nation's fight against illegal trade in wildlife.

The city-state, a nautical way point in shipments of banned animal products between Africa and Asia, is destroying tusks worth an estimated S\$18 million (\$13 million) including a record 8.8 tonne seizure last year which authorities said came from nearly 300 African elephants.

In the event, streamed online, workers in hard hats were seen emptying trolley-loads of tusks into a skip where they were then pulverised by an industrial rock crusher.

The crushing process may take several days and the fragments will then be incinerated.



Elephant ivory is coveted because it can be fashioned into items like combs, pendants and other exotic jewellery

"The destruction of the ivory... will prevent it from re-entering the market and will disrupt the global supply chain of illegally traded ivory," the National Parks Board said of the event, which comes ahead of Wednesday's World Elephant Day.

An estimated 100 African elephants are killed every day by poachers seeking ivory, meat and body parts, leaving only 400,000 remaining, environmentalists estimate. A large chunk of the demand for ivory

comes from Asian countries such as China and Vietnam, where it is turned into jewels and ornaments.

As well as taking a tough stance on transited products, Singapore said last year it would ban the domestic trade in ivory from September 2021.

"Elephant poaching is at crisis levels in Asia and Africa due to the illegal trade," said R. Raghunathan, CEO of World Wide Fund for Nature Singapore.

