

COVID 19 pandemic

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UK becomes the first country to approve a dual vaccine targeting Omicron. The United Kingdom has become the first country in the world to approve an updated version of COVID vaccine made by Moderna Inc. Moderna's latest vaccine is known as Spikevax, a bivalent vaccine that targets both the original strain and Omicron. Half of the dose provides immunisation against the original strain found in late 2019, while the other half targets the first Omicron strain (BA.1) from 2021. "An updated version of the COVID-19 vaccine made by Moderna that targets two coronavirus variants (known as a "bivalent" vaccine) has today been approved for adult booster doses by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) after it was found to meet the UK regulator's standards of safety, quality and effectiveness," reported an official government press release on Monday, August 15.¹ What we know of Omicron Cases of a new variant of SARS COV-2 were first reported in South Africa in November 2021. Since then, it has spread to various parts of the world, predominantly in the US and UK. The World Health Organisation (WHO) designated this variant, named Omicron, a variant of concern.² The Omicron variant spread more easily than the earlier variants of the COVID-19 virus. It can infect people with earlier infection of COVID-19. It can be transmitted from person to person regardless of vaccination history. Symptoms are mostly similar to previous variants. The severity depends on various

factors such as vaccination status, age, prior infection and history of other health conditions. Data suggests that Omicron generally causes less severe disease than the previous variants, although some people have encountered severe symptoms. Some patients have been hospitalised and severe cases have resulted in death as well.³ Vaccination strategy for Omicron The COVID-19 vaccines used worldwide in the pandemic were created for the original strain from 2020. Current vaccines still provide strong immunisation and can prevent severe illness and hospitalisation in Omicron infection. Booster doses have been given worldwide for the same. However, as the virus continues to mutate, resulting in a surge of cases worldwide, biotechnology companies like Moderna are ready to combat it with updated vaccines. A clinical trial on 437 people showed the updated vaccine was safe and gave a stronger antibody response against both Omicron (BA.1) and the original 2020 strain. Moderna said that a booster dose increased virus neutralising antibodies to approximately eightfold.⁴ An exploratory analysis also found a good immune response generated against the newer Omicron sub-variants BA.4 and BA.5. Side effects observed were the same as the original strain. The UK government press release described them as "typically mild and self-resolving" with "no serious safety concerns."¹ It is still uncertain how the updated vaccine will perform against the severe forms of Omicron infection or the

newer variants we might yet face. However, in the words of Dr June Raine, chief executive officer of the MHRA, “What this bivalent vaccine gives us is a sharpened tool in our armoury to help protect us against this disease as the virus

continues to evolve.” For now, eligible people worldwide are advised to come forward for their booster jabs as they would provide you with immunity against the newer variants.

REFERENCES:

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