

Study shows Russia's Sputnik V vaccine found to be 91 percent effective

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Russian scientists say the country's Sputnik V vaccine appears safe and effective against COVID-19

Moscow, February 2 (RHC)-- Russian scientists say the country's Sputnik V vaccine appears safe and effective against COVID-19, according to early results of an advanced study published in a British medical journal. The news is a boost for the shot that is increasingly being bought by nations around the world who are desperate to stop the devastation caused by the pandemic.

Researchers say based on their trial, which involved about 20,000 people in Russia last fall, the vaccine is about 91 percent effective and that the shot also appeared to prevent people from becoming severely ill with COVID-19. The study was published online on Tuesday in the journal, The Lancet.

Scientists not linked to the research acknowledged that the speed at which the Russian vaccine was made and rolled out was criticised for “unseemly haste, corner-cutting and an absence of transparency.” “But the outcome reported here is clear,” British scientists Ian Jones and Polly Roy wrote in an accompanying commentary. “Another vaccine can now join the fight to reduce the incidence of COVID-19.”

The Sputnik V vaccine was approved by the Russian government with much fanfare on August 11. President Vladimir Putin personally broke the news on national television and said one of his daughters had already been vaccinated. At the time, the vaccine had been tested only on dozens of people. Some early results were published in September, but participants had been followed for about 42 days only and there was no comparison group.

The latest study is based on research involving about 20,000 people aged above 18 at 25 hospitals in Moscow between September and November, of whom three-quarters got two doses of the Russian vaccine 21 days apart and the remainder got placebo shots. The most commonly reported side effects were flu-like symptoms, pain at the injection site and fatigue. Serious side effects were rare in both groups and four deaths were reported in the study, although none was considered to be the result of the vaccine.

The study included more than 2,100 people aged above 60 and the vaccine appeared to be about 92 percent effective in them. The research is continuing, but in December, Russia’s Health Ministry said it would cut the size of the study from the expected 40,000 to about 31,000 volunteers who have already enrolled. Developers of the vaccine cited ethical concerns about using placebo shots.

The Russian vaccine uses a modified version of the common cold-causing adenovirus to carry genes for the spike protein in the coronavirus as a way to prime the body to react if COVID-19 comes along. That is a similar technology to the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University. But unlike that two-dose vaccine, the Russians used a slightly different adenovirus for the second booster shot.

Some experts say that approach may explain why the Russian vaccine seems to have produced a better immune response than the AstraZeneca vaccine, which has a reported an efficacy rate of 60-70 percent. “This aims to drive higher immune responses to the target ‘spike’ by using two slightly different jabs,” said Alexander Edwards, an associate professor in biomedical technology at Britain’s University of Reading.

He said if you have two identical shots, it is possible the immune system does not get as big a boost from the second injection. He added that, because the Russian vaccine is made using a tested technology, it should be possible to scale up manufacturing.

Sputnik V began being rolled out in a large-scale vaccination campaign in Russia in December, with doctors and teachers the first in line to get the shot. Last month, Putin ordered the effort to be expanded and for mass immunisations to start.

In early January, the Russian Direct Investment Fund that bankrolled the jab said more than one million Russians have already been vaccinated with the domestically developed shot. Some Russian media questioned the number and suggested that the roll-out has been much slower, with many Russian regions reporting small numbers of vaccinations.

Outside Russia, Sputnik V has received authorisation in more than a dozen countries, according to the fund — including former Soviet republics of Belarus, Armenia and Turkmenistan; Latin American nations including Argentina, Bolivia and Venezuela; some African nations as well as Serbia, Iran, Palestine and the UAE.

In the European Union, the shot has received initial authorisation in Hungary and is still subject to final approval by the country's National Public Health Center.

Batches of the vaccine have already been supplied to six countries. In all, more than 50 countries submitted applications for 2.4 billion doses, an RDIF spokesman told The Associated Press news agency.

Algeria will begin producing the Sputnik V vaccine "within the coming weeks", according to Kamel Mansouri, the head of Algeria's national agency for pharmaceuticals.

The first batch of 50,000 doses of Sputnik V was flown to Algeria from Russia on Thursday, a 10th of what had been previously announced by the North African government. A cargo of 50,000 AstraZeneca doses arrived on Monday.

Mansouri said Algeria and Russia were in advanced discussions over Sputnik V and the vaccine would be manufactured at the government-owned SAIDAL facility. "It is time that Algeria, a country that imports vaccine, be able to produce it on-site to respond to the needs of the vaccination campaign, and to export in a second phase," he said Tuesday on national television.

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