

Netherlands temporarily halts AstraZeneca COVID vaccinations

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Amsterdam, April 5 (RHC)-- The Netherlands has stopped administering Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccinations until April 7. The Dutch health ministry said it would temporarily stop inoculations for people below the age of 60. But after talks on Saturday, health departments decided to suspend all AstraZeneca jabs to avoid waste.

Some 700 people over the age of 60 were due to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine in the coming days, but their appointments were also temporarily cancelled, as there were no guarantees that a full batch could be entirely used if only a few people were to receive jabs.

The decision comes days after authorities in Germany also stopped using AstraZeneca's vaccine in the below-60s, citing fresh concerns over unusual blood clots reported in a tiny number of those who received the shots.

Earlier on Friday, a Dutch organisation that monitors vaccine side effects said it had received five reports of blood clots with low blood platelet counts following vaccinations. DPA news agency reported that one person died. All the cases occurred between seven and 10 days after the vaccinations and all the people affected were women aged between 25 and 65.

Investigations are under way to ascertain whether these were caused by the vaccination. The vaccine monitoring organisation said in the period when the five cases were reported, some 400,000 people were vaccinated in the Netherlands with AstraZeneca's shot.

Health Minister Hugo de Jonge says the temporary halt is a precautionary measure. "I think it is very important that the Dutch reports are also properly investigated," de Jonge said. "We must err on the side of caution."

Saturday's decision is another setback for the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is critical to Europe's immunisation campaign and a linchpin in the global strategy to get shots to poorer countries as it is cheaper and easier to use than rival vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna.

It comes two weeks after the European Union drug regulator said the vaccine does not increase the overall incidence of blood clots following a similar scare. At the time, the European Medicines Agency said the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks, but it could not rule out a link between the shot and some unusual kinds of clots, and recommended adding a warning about possible rare side effects.

De Jonge said the Dutch pause comes before an update next week from the EU medicines agency on the AstraZeneca vaccine. Most EU countries, including Germany, resumed using the AstraZeneca vaccine on March 19.

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