

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

JOINT COMMITTEE ON VACCINATION AND IMMUNISATION ANNOUNCEMENT ON THE ASTRA ZENECA VACCINE

Published at 5.00 pm on 7 May 2021.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Vaccines continue to save lives in Northern Ireland and to protect people from serious illness. The Astra Zeneca vaccine continues to be essential in the successful roll-out of our vaccination programme. Thanks to this programme, close to a million people here have already received their first vaccine dose, helping society to emerge carefully from lockdown.

Following the latest advice from the JCVI (Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation), my Department has today issued an update on the Northern Ireland vaccination programme.

People aged under 40 will be able to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech through the regional Trust vaccination centres.

People of all ages who have had a first dose of Astra Zeneca should proceed with their second dose of this same vaccine. As Members will know getting the second vaccine dose is very important because it further increases the level of protection against COVID-19.

Those aged under 40 can still make an informed choice to receive the Astra Zeneca vaccine, for instance where no alternative vaccine is available, or where someone has an appointment booked for vaccination in the coming days and may prefer not to reschedule to receive an alternative vaccine.

The JCVI's updated advice relates to reports of extremely rare adverse events of concurrent thrombosis (blood clots) and thrombocytopenia (low platelet count) following vaccination with the first dose of AstraZeneca vaccine. The JCVI has made clear there have been no safety concerns identified for thrombosis/thrombocytopenia associated with the second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The JCVI has updated its risk/benefit advice in relation to age groups, following a review of the current low incidence of disease and current and projected availability of alternative vaccines. In light of these factors, Pfizer is now its recommended vaccine for under 40's.

The chances of a younger person becoming seriously ill with COVID-19 get smaller as infection rates increasingly come under control in the UK. That's altered the risk benefit balance for under 40's.

The change means some logistical alterations to Northern Ireland's vaccination programme. From Monday, May 10:

* People aged 40 plus can book Astra Zeneca first dose appointments at the SSE Arena vaccination centre and community pharmacies.

* People aged 30-39 can book their Pfizer first dose appointments at the other regional Trust vaccination centres across NI. These are Foyle Arena/ Omagh Leisure Centre/ Lakeland Forum/ South Lake Craigavon/ Seven Towers Ballymena/ RVH in Belfast.

* People aged 30-39 can choose to make an informed decision to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine from participating community pharmacies if that is what they prefer or if they decide they would rather not wait to receive an alternative to the AstraZeneca vaccine.

* Anyone aged under 40 already booked for their first vaccine at one of the Trust centres, including the SSE Arena, will have this appointment honoured – with the Pfizer vaccine.

* Anyone of any age who has received an Astra Zeneca first dose should proceed with their second dose of Astra Zeneca. That's unless they have had clinical advice not to do so.

My Department has today issued detailed Q&As in relation to this update: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/updated-ni-vaccination-programme-key-questions-answered>

It is undoubtedly the case that our vaccination programme is a huge and unprecedented undertaking. I want to again pay tribute to all those involved in delivering this programme. As we look forward to a better summer, with restrictions eased, we should all be very thankful for the vaccines. Their successful development and roll-out have made – and changed – history.

Logistical challenges are inevitable in any such undertaking, but the programme has already proved itself to be highly resilient.

Given the current supply schedules, the changes announced today will delay us to a limited degree in getting to the finish line of all adults being offered a first dose. I am advised that this delay will be a matter of weeks, rather than anything longer. Demand for vaccination remains very strong and I would again appeal to people still waiting for their jab to be patient. Their turn is coming.

I would urge Members to continue to do all they can to support the vaccination programme – and encourage take-up.

It is vitally important to reiterate that the potential risk associated with the AZ first dose is extremely rare and that the threat from COVID-19 is much higher for the majority of adults.

We all need protection from Covid. It remains an extremely serious threat to individuals and society. We must always be mindful of the devastation it has inflicted in Northern Ireland and across the world. Vaccination is our best defence and give us hope for the future.

I can assure Members that every effort will continue to be made to deliver vaccines as quickly as possible across Northern Ireland.