

COVID-19: PANEL PREPARES A BLUEPRINT FOR NATIONWIDE VACCINATION

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The government on Wednesday said a single central system will be set up to procure covid-19 vaccines for pan-India requirements, which will be supervised by the Centre, and advised states not to initiate separate mechanisms to buy the antigen.

After the first meeting of the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for covid-19, the Union health ministry said India will leverage domestic vaccine manufacturing capacity, besides engaging with all international manufacturers for early delivery of vaccines not only for domestic use but also for low- and middle-income nations, and key neighbouring and partner countries.

The meeting was chaired by Dr V.K. Paul, member of NITI Aayog, with Rajesh Bhushan, secretary, ministry of health and family welfare, as the co-chair.

The expert group deliberated on the conceptualization and implementation mechanisms for creating a digital infrastructure for inventory management and delivery of the vaccine, including a real-time tracking of the vaccination process, which will focus on last-mile delivery.

They also deliberated on the broad parameters to select vaccine candidates for the country and sought inputs from the standing technical sub-committee of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (NTAGI).

Besides, it laid down the guiding principles for identifying and prioritizing population groups for vaccination, the ministry said.

The members also identified ways to finance the procurement of the covid vaccines, and the available options for setting up delivery platforms, cold chain and associated infrastructure to roll out the vaccination strategy. The ministry said all follow-up action and possible scenarios were deliberated upon to ensure equitable and transparent delivery of vaccines.

"Issues related to vaccine safety and surveillance were taken up and the strategy for community involvement through transparent information and awareness creation were discussed," it added.

Earlier this week, the World Health Organization (WHO) said over \$100 billion will be required globally to procure the vaccines.

Indian pharmaceutical companies are aggressively involved in covid-19 vaccine development. Bharat Biotech's inactivated vaccine candidate, co-developed with the National Institute of Virology (NIV), is among three candidates currently undergoing human trials in India.

The other Indian candidate is Zydus Cadila Ltd's DNA plasmid vaccine, while the Serum Institute of India is conducting the phase 3 clinical trials for the adenovirus-based covid vaccine jointly developed by AstraZeneca Plc and the University of Oxford.

Last week, Serum Institute had received a \$150 million funding from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance, for two vaccines developed by University of Oxford and Novavax, on the condition that the Pune-based firm prices the vaccines at a maximum of \$3 per dose.

Under the agreement, the company will produce up to 100 million doses for distribution in India and other countries by the first half of 2021, once it receives approvals from regulators and under WHO's pre-qualification programme.

Meanwhile, India's covid case count continued its upward trend with more than 63,000 cases recorded in the past 24 hours.

While the global tally breached the 20 million mark, India registered 2,371,761 cases. Wednesday witnessed the highest single-day recovery to 56,110 at a rate of 70.38%.

In the first week of July, the daily average recovered cases were at 15,000; in the first week of August, it has surged to 50,000, with total recoveries at 1,673,643.

India's actual caseload stands at 643,948, which is 27.64% of the total positive cases. So far, over 26 million tests have been conducted, including 733,449 tests in the past 24 hours. The tests per million has jumped to 18,852.

Leroy Leo contributed to the story.

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