

# 'INDIA'S RIGID BOOSTER POLICY IS HURTING IMMUNOCOMPROMISED PATIENTS'

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One of India's top oncologists says the government should revise its policy on booster doses because immunocompromised patients of all ages, including those with cancer, are greater risk of developing more severe covid-19.

Dr C.S. Pramesh of Tata Memorial Hospital told Mint that these patients need to be prioritized for the booster shot. India's current policy for boosters is open only to healthcare workers and those above the age of 60 with comorbidities.

"Patients with cancer, those who have undergone organ transplants and patients who are immunosuppressed are at higher risk of developing more severe covid-19, and hence should be prioritized for a vaccine booster," said Dr Pramesh.

Cancer patients, he pointed out, are immunosuppressed both by their disease and their treatment.

"They have been shown in previous waves to have a higher rate of severe disease as well as mortality from covid-19. It would be important that they be given the opportunity to get a booster dose of the vaccine," he added.

In most developed countries covid-19 booster shots are open to everyone above the age of 12, but senior adults and those who are immunocompromised are particularly advised to go for booster shots.

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US recommends a booster shot five months after individuals receive their primary doses of single or double dose vaccines. In case of immune suppressed people, the CDC recommends the booster shot as early as one month after the second dose of the Pfizer/Moderna and J&J vaccine.

The UK's National Health Service has even recommended a fourth dose for patients who are undergoing radiation or chemotherapy. The instruction is to provide a third shot eight weeks after completing the primary vaccination, with the fourth dose recommended 91 days after shot three.

In India estimates suggest that nearly 1.4 million people were diagnosed with cancer in 2020 alone. V.K. Paul, member NITI Aayog and the official leading India's vaccine strategy earlier this month said India has no plans to open booster shots for all adults and will take a call on it based on available scientific evidence.

However experts say that going by evidence instead of having rigid criteria like age, the booster doses should be made available to those who are most at risk of the disease. "Perhaps a 15-year-old oncology patient needs a booster more than a healthy 60-year-old," Dr Pramesh had told a panel discussion organized by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health last week. India's current booster doses stand at about 1.9 million.

Studies have shown that antibody response from current covid-19 vaccines fades six months after the initial dosage. The current vaccines however do offer protection from severe disease.

India has approved eight vaccines that are supplied by four companies- Serum Institute of India, Bharat Biotech, Sputnik V, Zydus Cadila and Biological E.

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