

Oxford vaccine 100% effective against severe Covid in US trial

Rhys Blakely Science Correspondent

A large US trial of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine has confirmed that it is highly effective at preventing severe Covid-19 and that it works well in older people.

It was also found to be safe with no hint of an increased risk of blood clots.

More than 32,000 volunteers took part in the trial, mostly in America, but also in Chile and Peru. They received either two standard doses of the jab or a placebo at a four-week interval.

It was 79 per cent effective in preventing symptomatic Covid-19 and, among the trial participants, it was 100 per cent effective against severe disease.

The results would seem to put to rest the idea that the Oxford jab is somehow substantially inferior to other vaccines. "In participants aged 65 years and over, vaccine efficacy was 80 per cent," AstraZeneca said in a statement.

Several European countries had restricted the vaccine to younger age groups. However, Professor Ann Falsey of the University of Rochester School of Medicine, one of the trial chiefs, said: "This analysis validates the AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine as a much-needed additional vaccination option, offering confidence that adults of all ages can benefit from protection against the virus."

An independent data safety monitoring board looked specifically at whether trial participants experienced blood clots. In particular, they looked at whether there was any hint of the vaccine leading to an increased risk of cerebral venous sinus thrombosis — blood clots in the brain's venous sinuses. Reports of this condition led to use of the vaccine being suspended in countries across Europe.

The independent panel, which recruited an independent neurologist to assist its investigation, found no evidence of an increased risk.

It is yet to be seen whether the data will ease anxieties. The Oxford jab has been sniped at for months and YouGov polling released yesterday shows how trust has plummeted across Europe.

More than 60 per cent of people in France thought that the vaccine was not safe, up 18 percentage points from February. In Germany it was 55 per cent and in Spain it was 52 per cent.

In Britain 77 per cent of adults say it is safe but confidence has taken a knock: 9 per cent say it is unsafe, up four percentage points from February.

Professor Andrew Pollard, lead investigator of the Oxford University trial

of the vaccine, said: "These results are great news as they show the remarkable efficacy of the vaccine in a new population and are consistent with the results from Oxford-led trials.

"We can expect strong impact against Covid-19 across all ages and for people of all different backgrounds from widespread use of the vaccine."

Professor Sarah Gilbert, one of the designers of the vaccine, said: "In many different countries and across age groups the vaccine is providing a high level of protection against Covid-19 and we hope this will lead to even more widespread use."

The Oxford vaccine is cheaper and easier to handle than others but several countries in Europe and in other parts of the world suspended its use last week after reports of blood clots.

The EU medical regulator and the World Health Organisation had already stated that there was no evidence linking the jab to an increased risk of clotting.

Among the 20 million people who had received the vaccine across Europe, 25 had developed clots. The rate that would normally occur among unvaccinated people is higher.

Sir Mene Pangalos, head of research and development for AstraZeneca, said: "I do hope [the trial results] puts to bed any doubts about the vaccine efficacy. Overall it's been shown to be highly effective. So I hope that the US study now will continue to give the vaccine some momentum and get it used even further around the world."

He added that the vaccine could win emergency authorisation in the US in the second half of April. If so, the company could deliver 30 million doses immediately and an additional 20 million within the first month.

Whether the US would use them is uncertain: the Biden administration has already forecast that it will have enough doses for all adults by the end of May, using supplies from Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, whose vaccines have already been approved there. The White House has faced calls to offer its stocks of the Oxford jab to other countries.

Anthony Fauci, the top US infectious disease expert, said of the results: "There are very many countries in Europe and throughout the world who have already authorised this, so the fact that a United States-run study has confirmed the efficacy and the safety of this vaccine I think is an important contribution to global health in general."

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I've got vaccine envy, Times2

Holidays in the balance

Where the average number of cases has increased or decreased between March 14 and 21

