

Official: Merck to help produce rival J&J's COVID-19 vaccine

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This September 2020, file photo provided by Johnson & Johnson shows a pharmacist preparing to give an experimental COVID-19 vaccine. The U.S. is getting a third vaccine to prevent COVID-19, as the Food and Drug Administration on Saturday, Feb. 27, 2021 cleared a Johnson & Johnson shot that works with just one dose instead of two. (Johnson & Johnson via AP, File)

Drugmaker Merck & Co. will help produce rival Johnson & Johnson's newly approved coronavirus vaccine in an effort to expand supply more quickly, the White House said Tuesday.

The announcement comes as the White House looks to speed the production of the single-dose vaccine. Officials have said J&J faced unexpected production issues with its vaccine and produced only 3.9 million doses ahead of its receiving emergency use authorization on Saturday. The company says it is on pace to deliver 100 million doses by the end of June.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki also announced Tuesday that the federal government was increasing supply of vaccines to states next week to 15.2 million doses per week, up from 14.5 million previously. States will also receive 2.8

million doses of the J&J shot this week.

Facing questions about the company's slipping delivery schedule, J&J Vice President Richard Nettles told lawmakers on Capitol Hill last week that the company had faced "significant challenges" because of its "highly complex" manufacturing process.

The assistance from Merck was expected to help J&J meet its production commitments and expand supply even further, but the administration did not immediately provide specifics.

Psaki said that an "across the administration effort" was required to get the two historic rivals to work together on the vaccines, even though conversations between the two companies have been going on for months.

"There's a difference between conversations and it moving forward," she said.

President Joe Biden is set to highlight the development in a speech Tuesday afternoon, as his administration now expects to have enough supply of the three approved vaccines to inoculate all eligible American adults by June—though actually delivering the injections could take longer.

It was not immediately clear when the effect of Merck's assistance would be reflected in supply. Previously, federal officials have cautioned that setting up the highly specialized manufacturing lines to produce vaccines would take months.

The White House said Merck would devote two plants to the production process. One would make the vaccine and the other would handle inserting the vaccine into vials and ensuring strict quality controls. Psaki said the Biden administration was using its powers under the Defense Production Act to help Merck retool to work on the production.

The news was first reported by The Washington Post.

Merck halted its own plans to develop a coronavirus vaccine earlier this year, finding that their candidates were generating an inferior immune system response compared with other vaccines. It said it would instead focus its work on developing treatments for COVID-19.

Compared to the two-dose versions produced by Moderna and Pfizer, the J&J vaccine is less resource intensive to distribute and administer, making it a critical piece to U.S. plans to spread vaccinations around the world—but only once Americans are inoculated. The J&J vaccine can be stored for months at refrigerated temperatures, rather than frozen, and doesn't require patients to return for a second dose three or four weeks later.

Ahead of the White House announcement, Merck wouldn't discuss a deal with the New Brunswick, New Jersey-based Johnson & Johnson to make doses of the COVID-19 vaccine or say whether it is talking with other companies about helping to make theirs.

"Merck remains steadfast in our commitment to contribute to the global response to the pandemic and to preparing to address future pandemics," the Kenilworth, New Jersey-based company said in a statement.

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