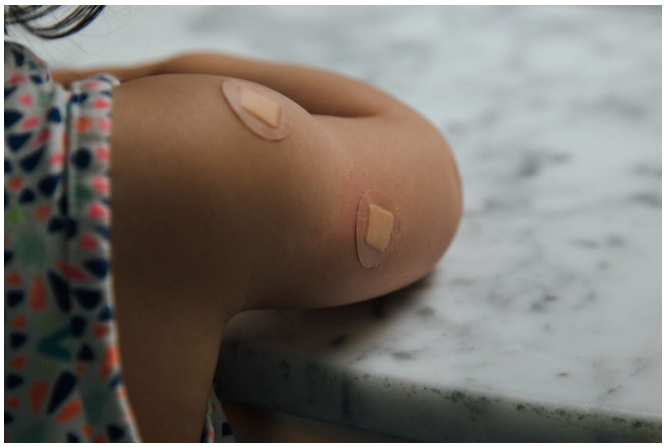
EU agency to meet Thursday over AstraZeneca concerns

15 March 2021



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The European Medicines Agency announced a special meeting Thursday to decide on "further actions" over the AstraZeneca vaccine, but added that the benefits of the jab still outweighed the risks.

After several more countries including France and Germany suspended the vaccine's use over blood clot fears, the EMA said its safety committee would "further review the information" about the shot on Tuesday.

The Amsterdam-based regulator "has called an extraordinary meeting on Thursday 18 March to conclude on the information gathered and any further actions that may need to be taken," it added in a statement.

French President Emmanuel Macron had earlier said he expected the EMA's announcement on the review of AstraZeneca's statement on Tuesday.

The watchdog said it still believed the British-Swedish vaccine was safe to use.

"EMA currently remains of the view that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine in preventing COVID-19, with its associated risk of hospitalisation and death, outweigh the risks of side effects," Monday's statement said.

Marco Cavaleri, head of the EMA's vaccines strategy had earlier told the European Parliament's health committee: "We're scrutinising all the data, particularly the fatal cases that have been reported."

But he said the agency "will not see any problem in continuing with the vaccination campaign using this vaccine".

The suspected side effects included blood clots, with some cases involving "unusual features" such as low numbers of platelets—blood cells that aid clotting, the EMA said.

But the EMA said these had occurred in "a very small number of people who received the vaccine.

"Many thousands of people develop blood clots annually in the EU for different reasons," it added.

"The number of thromboembolic events overall in vaccinated people seems not to be higher than that seen in the general population."

The watchdog is working closely with AstraZeneca, experts in blood disorders and other health authorities including Britain "based on its experience with around 11 million administered doses of the vaccine", it said.

The EMA had been working on the issue over the weekend and "rigorous analysis" of the cases would continue in coming days ahead of the special meeting, it added.