

EU regulator clears tweaked versions of COVID vaccines

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A Jackson, Miss., resident receives a Pfizer booster shot from a nurse at a vaccination site Feb. 8, 2022. The Biden administration hopes to make getting a COVID-19 booster as routine as going in for the yearly flu shot. Credit: AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis, File

The European Medicines Agency has recommended the authorization of two coronavirus vaccines made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna Inc., tweaked to include protection against an early version of the omicron variant.

In a statement on Thursday, the EU drug regulator said the two messenger RNA boosters offered protection both against the original version of COVID-19 and the [omicron](#) subvariant BA.1, which has since been overtaken globally by later omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5. Nearly 80% of coronavirus cases worldwide are now being caused by omicron BA.5, according to the World Health Organization.

The decision comes a day after the [U.S. drug regulator cleared](#) updated versions of COVID-19 vaccines incorporating protection against the later subvariants, after telling pharmaceuticals in June that any updated boosters must target the most

recent versions of omicron.

The European Medicines Agency said adapted vaccines are expected "to help maintain optimal protection against COVID-19 as the virus evolves." The regulator is also currently reviewing an updated version of the Pfizer-BioNTech [vaccine](#) that aims to protect against the later BA.4 and BA.5 omicron variants.

Scientists [hope the new boosters](#) will trigger a strong response from the [immune system](#) to prevent not just serious illness but perhaps milder infections also—much like the original vaccines did earlier in the pandemic, before super-contagious mutants emerged.

It's unclear how well the updated boosters will work since experts are still gathering data. But there's evidence that they are safe, so waiting for more study on their effectiveness would risk another mutation appearing before people are immunized.

Last month, British authorities cleared an updated [version](#) of the Moderna [booster](#) that included protection against omicron subvariant BA.1, saying the shots would be offered to people 50 and over beginning in September.

In Germany, health minister Karl Lauterbach said that inoculations with the new vaccines could start next week and that "now is the optimal time to close vaccination gaps for the fall."

Globally, coronavirus cases and deaths have been dropping for weeks, but scientists expect a surge of hospitalizations and deaths with the coming onset of winter in the northern hemisphere.

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