

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Prof Sir Michael McBride**



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

HSS(MD)79/2021

FOR ACTION

Chief Executives HSC *Trusts (for onward cascade to
Medical Directors)*

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/Health and Social
Care Board.

GP Medical Advisers, Health & Social Care Board

All General Practitioners and GP Locums (*for onward
distribution to practice staff*).

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Our Ref: HSS(MD)79/2021

Date: 6 December 2021

PLEASE SEE ATTACHED FULL CIRCULATION LIST

Dear Colleague

**JCVI ISSUES ADVICE ON THE VACCINE RESPONSE TO THE OMICRON
VARIANT**

1. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has recently issued updated advice in relation to the UK vaccine response to the Omicron COVID-19 variant. Optimising individual protection ahead of a wave of infection will provide the largest benefit in terms of reducing the impact of the Omicron variant on the NI population.
2. In response to this latest variant, JCVI advises the following immediate measures within the COVID-19 vaccine programmes:
 - I. Booster vaccination eligibility should be expanded to include all adults aged 18 years to 39 years.
 - II. Booster vaccination should now be offered in order of descending age groups, with priority given to the vaccination of older adults and those in a COVID-19 at-risk group.
 - III. Booster vaccination should not be given within three months of completion of the primary course.
 - IV. Severely immunosuppressed individuals who have completed their primary course (three doses) should be offered a booster dose with a minimum of three months between the third primary and booster dose. (See HSS(MD)66/2021 - <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk>)

[ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-66-2021.pdf](https://www.ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-66-2021.pdf))

Those who have not yet received their third dose may be given the third dose now to avoid further delay. A further booster dose can be given in three months, in line with the clinical advice on optimal timing.

- V. Both the Moderna (50 microgram) and Pfizer-BioNTech (30 microgram) vaccines should be used with equal preference in the COVID-19 booster programme. Both vaccines have been shown to substantially increase antibody levels when offered as a booster dose.
3. The JCVI advice has been accepted in full in Northern Ireland. Anyone aged 50 years or over or those aged 18 to 49 in an 'at risk' group can now receive their booster dose once they have passed **3 months** from the date of their second dose.
 4. Those in the 40-49 age cohort can also receive their booster but at present the 6 month interval from their second dose still applies. Eligibility for this age group will be gradually widened in the coming weeks reducing to the recommended three month interval.
 5. Those aged 18 to 39 will be called forward on phased basis in order of descending age groups, as the JCVI has advised.
 6. In addition, JCVI advises the following secondary measure, subject to appropriate consideration by deployment teams regarding feasibility:
 - All children and young people aged 12 to 15 years should be offered a second dose (30-micrograms) of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at a minimum of 12 weeks from the first dose.

The interval between vaccines may be reduced to at least 8 weeks between doses if the emerging epidemiological data supports this (and those aged 16 to 17 may also be offered their second dose with an interval of at least 8 weeks).

7. The overall intention of the measures advised above is to accelerate the deployment of COVID-19 vaccines before the peak of any impending Omicron wave. There are currently no data to indicate that Omicron infection is associated with a change in the pattern of susceptibility to serious COVID-19 (hospitalisation and death). Persons of older age, or who are in COVID-19 at-risk groups are likely to remain at higher risk from serious COVID-19; therefore, vaccination should be prioritised accordingly.

8. We would therefore strongly urge GPs, Community Pharmacies and Trusts to make continued efforts to offer COVID-19 vaccination (first, second and booster doses) to adults who have yet to receive any COVID-19 vaccinations.

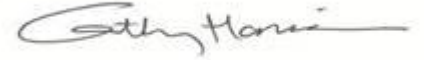
Yours sincerely



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Chief Medical Officer



Linda Kelly
Acting Chief Nursing Officer



Mrs Cathy Harrison
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

