

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



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

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HSS(MD)15/2023

BY EMAIL

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PLEASE SEE ATTACHED FULL CIRCULATION LIST

Dear Colleague

**JCVI ADVICE ON 2023 COVID-19 SPRING BOOSTER PROGRAMME AND
SIGNIFICANT CHANGES TO THE PRIMARY COURSE OFFER**

1. The purpose of this letter is to bring to your attention:

- the recent advice issued by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) with regards to a spring COVID-19 booster programme;
- note that the COVID-19 autumn 2022/23 booster programme (including the primary booster offer) officially ends on the 31 March 2023
- note the two significant changes to the COVID-19 vaccination programme which will be implemented following the end of the spring programme on the 30 June 2023.

2. My recent letter of 1 March 2023 (HSS (MD) 12/2023) had set out the planning assumptions for a spring 2023 COVID-19 vaccination booster programme and the JCVI statement <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spring-2023-covid-19-vaccination-programme-jcvi-advice-22-february-2023/jcvi-statement-on-spring-2023-covid-19-vaccinations-22-february-2023> has now confirmed these assumptions by recommending vaccinating the following groups:

- Everyone aged 75 years and over
- All residents in a care home, and
- Individuals aged 5 years and over who are immunocompromised

3. The COVID-19 spring booster programme will start from the 12 April 2023. GPs will be asked to invite their eligible patients aged 75+ and those who are immunocompromised in for vaccination, while all care homes will be paired with a community pharmacy who will attend the home and offer the vaccine to residents. Community pharmacies should prioritise care home residents from the beginning of the spring booster programme. In addition to being invited by their own GP, those aged 75+ or immunocompromised individuals will also have the option to receive the vaccine via a participating community pharmacy.
4. Trusts will play a much reduced role in the spring programme mainly vaccinating eligible housebound patients from lists supplied by GPs. Trusts will also vaccinate those immunocompromised individuals aged 5 to under 18 years of age.
5. Two new COVID-19 vaccines will be used in Northern Ireland during the spring programme. These are the:
 - Comirnaty Original/Omicron BA.4-5 vaccine (Pfizer); and
 - VidPrevtyn Beta COVID-19 vaccine (Sanofi/GSK).

Based on JCVI advice as outlined in the Green Book the preference for primary vaccination based on the current supply position is to use the bivalent mRNA vaccines with the latest variant (currently BA 4.5), however using a bivalent vaccine with a previous variant (such as BA.1) may be used if there would otherwise be a delay in vaccination. Pfizer have made a submission to the MHRA and EMA to have Comirnaty Original/Omicron BA4.5 regulated as a primary course vaccine, however this will not be approved in time for the spring booster programme therefore in line with JCVI and Green Book advice the Comirnaty Original/ Omicron BA 4.5 vaccine can be used 'off label' as a primary course during the spring programme.

New PGDs for these variant vaccines are expected to be available in the first week of April ahead of the programme commencing on 12 April.

6. To minimise the risk of inadvertently administering a bivalent BA.1 vaccine during the spring programme, vaccine providers should ensure that all residual stock of bivalent vaccines Comirnaty BA.1 and/or Spikevax BA.1 are disposed of before the start of the spring booster programme.
7. The current COVID-19 autumn 2022/23 booster programme, which began in the week commencing 19 September 2022 will come to an end on 31 March 2023. Providers are not required to vaccinate those eligible for an autumn booster from that point onwards.
8. As you will recall in my letter of 2 February 2023 (HSS (MD)5/2023) <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-5-23.pdf> JCVI advised that the 2021 first booster offer for persons aged 16 to 49 who are not in a clinical at risk group (third dose/1st booster dose, first made available to this age cohort from around December 2021) should close in

alignment with the close of the autumn 2022/23 booster vaccination campaign. This offer will therefore cease from 31 March 2023.

9. In addition to the spring programme, two significant changes to the COVID-19 vaccination programme will be implemented from the end of the spring programme on the 30 June 2023:

- **The offer of a primary course of vaccination for any healthy persons aged 5-49 years of age who have yet to take up the offer will cease; and**
- **The ongoing offer of a primary course of vaccination for eligible individuals who have yet to take up the offer (i.e those aged 50 years and over and those aged 5 to 49 years of age in a clinical risk group) will only be available to coincide with a seasonal programme such as a spring or autumn programme.**

10. These changes had been contained in the JCVI statement released on 27 January 2023, and were mentioned in my letter dated 2 February 2023, but the timing of the changes had not been confirmed at that stage, see - (HSS(MD)05/2023) <https://www.healthni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-5-23.pdf>

11. Therefore to summarise these two important changes:

- Any healthy individual aged 5-49 years of age who have not yet taken up the offer of their primary COVID-19 vaccines can still receive two doses up to the **30 June 2023**.
- Any individuals aged 50 years and older, or aged 5-49 and in a clinical risk group, who remain unvaccinated, the offer of vaccination will continue to be available but only during an ongoing campaign such as a spring or autumn booster programme. i.e they can still receive their vaccinations until the 30 June 2023 but it will then only become available again during the autumn 2023 programme (which is expected to start in October 2023).

12. These changes will help move the COVID-19 vaccination programme onto a more business as usual footing, however this position may change subject to further JCVI advice in response to any COVID-19 variant of concern.

Yours sincerely



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