



## Don't count on needing a COVID booster shot – WHO scientist

By BLOOMBERG and CHARISSA LUCI-ATIENZA

As some governments and pharmaceutical officials prepare for COVID booster shots targeting

more-infectious virus variants, health authorities say it's too early to tell if they will be required.

"We do not have the information that's necessary ►8

## Don't count on needing...

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to make the recommendation on whether or not a booster will be needed," Soumya Swaminathan, the World Health Organization's chief scientist, said in a Zoom interview Friday. The "science is still evolving."

Such a call is "premature" while high-risk individuals in most of the world haven't yet completed a first course of vaccination, Swaminathan said.

Data from countries introducing precautionary extra inoculations later this year – particularly for vulnerable people whose immunity to SARS-CoV-2 may wane faster – will inform WHO's guidance, she said.

COVID booster shots are likely to be rolled out in the UK in the fall to avoid another winter surge. Seven different vaccines are being tested in volunteers in England in the world's first booster study, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said last month.

### Tweaking shots

More-transmissible variants, including the beta strain that emerged in South Africa, require higher antibody levels to prevent infection, prompting vaccine makers including Pfizer Inc. and Moderna Inc. to test whether tweaked versions of their existing shots will provide broader immunity.

One dose of Novavax Inc.'s variant-directed vaccine may provide sufficient protection against the beta strain in individuals previously immunized against COVID-19, according to pre-clinical research released this month by scientists at the Gaithersburg, Maryland-based company and the University of Maryland's School of Medicine.

The modified shot also has the potential to provide broad protection against various strains if used as a primary vaccine regimen, said Gregory M. Glenn, Novavax's president of research and development, in a June 11 statement.

So far, the existing US-approved vaccines work well enough to protect against beta, delta, and two other strains that the WHO has designated as variants of concern, said Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health.

Early data from the UK, Spain, and Germany suggest a "mix-and-match" regimen using two different types of vaccines generates more pain, fever, and other minor side effects compared with two doses of the same inoculation, the WHO's Swaminathan said.

Combinations of the AstraZeneca Plc and Pfizer-BioNTech shots are being considered in Malaysia, where the government is trying to speed up immunizations to achieve population-level immunity by year-end, Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said on Wednesday.

"It seems to be working well, this concept of heterologous prime-boost," Swaminathan said. "This opens up the op-





portunity for countries that have vaccinated people with one vaccine and now are waiting for the second dose they have run out of, to potentially be able to use a different platform vaccine."

#### **Shelve COVID-19 booster shot plans**

The Department of Science and Technology's (DOST) vaccine expert panel (VEP) has a piece of advice for you.

VEP chair Dr. Nina Gloriani urged fully vaccinated Filipinos to shelve their plans to receive booster shots in the spirit of "equity" even as she affirmed that booster shots could increase one's level of protection against COVID-19.

"Habang limited ang ating supply sana ay wag muna natin gawin yan (While our supply is limited, I hope we don't do that)," she told the TeleRadyo in an interview on Saturday.

She said the duration of antibodies for those who were fully vaccinated against COVID-19 could range from six and nine months.

"Pero 'pag boost ng boost, maya't maya magpapaboost every month, wala rin mangyayaring iba doon kasi nasa-saturate 'yung ibang mga immune cells ninyo at hindi na tataas pa ang antibodies ninyo. May saturation point 'yan. Papanhik tapos may point yan na magplateau. Kahit inject ka ng inject hindi na po 'yan tataas at sayang lang (But, when you always get boosters, from time to time you will get a booster every month, nothing else will happen there because your other immune cells are saturated and your antibodies will not increase. That has a saturation point. It will go up and then there's a point it will plateau. Even if you get injected, it won't increase and it will be useless)," she explained.

Gloriani said the Philippines' study on the safety and efficacy of mixing and matching five COVID-19 jabs is expected to start by next month.

Asked if individuals fully vaccinated with China's Sinovac vaccine may get another vaccine brand as a booster, Gloriani said, "Ang mas tanong ay makakasama ba? Well hindi naman, kasi ang booster ay mag-iincrease ng iyong immune response pero in a pandemic kunwari sa atin, unless palabas nga at requirement na ganun, mayroon tayo na tinatawag na equity. Gusto natin yung mas marami ang magkakaran ng bakuna. Pag nabigyan ka na ng dalawa, ibigay mo ang pangtatlo at pang apat dun sa iba naman (The real question is will it be harmful? Well not really, because the booster will increase your immune response but in a pandemic let's say, unless it has been issued and became a requirement, we have what we call equity. We want more people to have the vaccines. When you have been given two doses, give the third and fourth doses to others)."