

European Commission's advisory panel on COVID-19

Report – videoconference Wednesday 28/07/2021 at 19h00

The President recalled that 70% of adults in the EU have received at least a first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. This is an important milestone and efforts must continue to reach full vaccination coverage. In the EU 57% of adults are fully vaccinated with two doses. She stressed the importance of closing the gap between vaccines delivered and vaccines administered.

The President recalled that the Delta variant is now dominant in the EU and asked the Panel for their views on the epidemiological situation, the key issues of concern and the way forward regarding vaccination.

The Panel members confirmed the spread of the Delta variant across the EU. The higher transmissibility of this variant has led to an increase in case notifications in most Member States. However, thanks to vaccination, mortality seems to no longer follow case notification as closely as before. Nevertheless, there is a relatively slow but steady increase in the hospitalisation rate leading to new concerns regarding the sustainability of the healthcare system if the cases are not controlled.

The experts agreed on the fact that there is a discrepancy between Member States and that the key indicators (e.g. infections and hospitalisations) behave differently in different countries. However, some common elements were identified. For example, nightlife appears to be a clear contributing factor to the rapid spread of the virus as well as specific super-spreader events such as big festivals and “end-of-the-year school trips”.

It was clear that the rapid spread of a new variant among a partially vaccinated population might lead to an epidemic among young people. The concern of long-term health effects was raised.

The Panel discussed the role of children and young adults in the spread of the virus. Alternative ways of addressing it were discussed (vaccination, daily testing, etc.). The effect of summer closing of schools and universities on the epidemiological situation was discussed.

The experts agreed that new waves of infection could only be contained through continued vaccination and specific non-pharmaceutical measures. The Panel noted that modelling is increasingly difficult and this leads to further uncertainty.

The experts noted that the 70% target already reached might now be too low for the Delta variant and that the need for a booster is still unclear. Different approaches could be taken: booster for vulnerable groups, booster for those individuals with a weak response to vaccination due to underlying health concerns, etc.

Finally, the Panel discussed the issue of respiratory diseases (particularly RSV and influenza) and their expected incidence. It was concluded that diagnostics able to distinguish between different viruses would be needed and that tackling a possible combination of influenza and COVID-19 would require specific planning (e.g. booster administration together with influenza vaccination appointments).

Participants in the videoconference:

- European Commission: President Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioner Kyriakides, P. Haugaard, P. Delsaux, R. Reig Rodrigo
- Mike Catchpole (ECDC Chief Scientist)
- Peter Piot (London School of Tropical Medicine)
- Arnaud Fontanet (Institut Pasteur)
- Lothar Wieler (Robert Koch Institute)
- Maria Capobianchi (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Rome)
- Kåre Mølbak (Statens Serum Institute, Copenhagen)
- Miklós Szócska (Director of The Health Services Management Training Centre of the Semmelweis University)
- Marion Koopmans (Erasmus MC)
- Christian Drosten (Charité)

Excused:

- Fernando Simon (Coordination Centre for Health Alerts and Emergencies, Spain)