

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health

Opening Statement

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Chair of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC)

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Mr Chairman, Deputies, and Guests

Thank you for the invitation to attend the Joint Committee. The rollout of the COVID-19 and seasonal influenza vaccination programmes are managed by the HSE. I will update you on the need for COVID-19 vaccine boosters and NIAC's seasonal influenza [vaccine](#) recommendations.

NIAC brings together a broad range of experts to formulate its advice. NIAC members regularly participate in meetings of the World Health Organization and European advisory bodies on immunisation.

NIAC has sent comprehensive recommendations to the Chief Medical Officer on issues regarding the COVID-19 vaccination programme relating to priority groups for vaccination, vaccine safety, pregnancy, children, and adolescents, and most recently booster vaccinations.

The most effective way to prevent COVID-19 related hospitalisation, severe illness and death is to ensure that all eligible people are fully vaccinated. They are strongly encouraged and should be facilitated to complete the vaccination course.

An additional COVID-19 vaccine dose may be required because

- i) an inadequate protective response to the first course
- ii) waning of immunity or
- iii) the emergence of resistant variant strains.

Additional doses are often collectively referred to as 'boosters'. However, distinction should be made between the need for an additional dose where the scheduled course is inadequate, i.e., an extended primary course, and the need to reinforce a waning immune response i.e. a booster dose. An additional dose or doses of the original or a modified vaccine may also be required to protect against a resistant variant.

Those with severe immunocompromise, for example after an organ transplant, or receiving immunosuppressive treatments may not have adequate protection following a primary

vaccine course. For them, an additional primary dose increases the likelihood of achieving protection.

Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities and many older people living in the community have suffered severe disruption to their quality of life, with negative impact on their psychological and social wellbeing during the pandemic. This group have a poorer response to the primary vaccine course and more rapidly waning immunity because of their age and underlying medical conditions.

In order to optimise protection, NIAC has recommended that an additional vaccine dose should be given to those aged 12 and older with immunocompromise associated with a suboptimal response to vaccines, those aged 80 and older, and those aged 65 and older living in long-term care facilities.

As we head into the influenza season, NIAC has also recommended that the COVID-19 and the seasonal influenza vaccines may be given at the same time or at any interval apart. This will allow the uptake of both vaccines to be optimised. This year an adjuvanted quadrivalent influenza vaccine is recommended for those aged 65 years and older as it provides better protection for this age group.

NIAC continues to examine evidence regarding the need for a booster COVID-19 vaccine for other groups. These include those at increased risk of severe COVID-19 disease, other older persons, and healthcare workers because of their role in providing essential health services.

Consideration for boosters takes into account whether additional doses are safe, needed, and can provide benefit. Influencing factors include community levels of circulating SARS-COV-2 and the impact of the high vaccination uptake in Ireland, with over 90 per cent of adults fully vaccinated.

This high uptake is a testament to the public confidence in the programme and credit to all involved in the development and rollout of the vaccine programme.

NIAC is conscious of the global demands on vaccine supplies and recognises that facilitating vaccination on a global level is important on a humanitarian and global equity basis, and essential to limit the continuing threat of COVID-19 in Ireland. NIAC is cognisant of the WHO position and advice on global vaccination and our duty to address inequities.

Until global control is achieved, all countries remain at risk and return to normality will be compromised.

Vaccines are a global public good for the benefit of all. NIAC is mindful that low and middle income countries (LMIC) have insufficient doses to protect those most at risk. Less than 2% of people there have received a first dose of vaccine; it is estimated that many will not have received even one vaccine until late 2023.

Ending the pandemic requires global cooperation. Failure to mitigate high community transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in any country can facilitate emergence of resistant variants, prolonging the global threat .

NIAC welcomes Ireland's participation in the COVAX Facility, which supports LMICs in vaccine access. NIAC encourages the Government to continue with, and expand its commitment to the global coordinated effort, based on the principle of solidarity, to foster equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines.

In upholding the principles of moral equality, minimising harm, and fairness, as set out in the National Allocation Framework for Equitable Access to COVID-19 Vaccine(s), NIAC is seeking to protect those who are most at risk from severe COVID-19 while recognising that access to a lifesaving vaccine by those most at risk should not depend on country of origin or residency.

As stated by the European Group on Ethics in Science and Technologies, "It is more important than ever in this difficult time to uphold a form of solidarity that is inclusive of everyone, which recognises that respect is due to everyone, and not exclusive to those that live in our own town, region, or country."

NIAC acknowledges the significant support of our voluntary members and the collaboration with, and by, all involved in the vaccination programme, in pursuing a common goal of reducing deaths and severe illness from COVID-19. Through maintaining confidence in a high-quality vaccination programme, we can maximise vaccine uptake and reap societal benefits.

Thank you for your attention.