

- Vaccination / Variation (Biology) / Virus

Repeat boosters not viable to fight new variants: WHO

It calls for new vaccines that better prevent transmission, greater access to primary shots

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GENEVA · World Health Organisation (WHO) experts warned that repeating booster doses of the original Covid-19 vaccines is not a viable strategy against emerging variants and called for new jabs that better protect against transmission. “A vaccination strategy based on repeated booster doses of the original vaccine composition is unlikely to be appropriate or sustainable,” an expert group created by the WHO to assess the performance of Covid-19 vaccines said in a statement on Tuesday.

The WHO Technical Advisory Group on Covid-19 Vaccine Composition (TAG-Co-VAC) said there could be a need to update existing vaccines to better target emerging variants, like Omicron, which has spread rapidly and has been detected in 149 countries so far.

It called for the development of new jabs that not only protect people who contract Covid-19 against falling seriously ill but also better prevent people from catching the virus in the first place.

“Covid-19 vaccines that have high impact on prevention of infection and transmission, in addition to the prevention of severe disease and death, are needed and should be developed,” TAG-Co-VAC said.

This, it said, would help lower “community transmission and the need for stringent and broadreaching public health and social measures”.

It also suggested that vaccine developers should strive to create jabs that “elicit immune responses that are broad, strong and long-lasting in order to reduce the need for successive booster doses”.

According to the WHO, 331 candidate vaccines are currently being worked on around the world.

Until new vaccines have been developed, the group said, “the composition of current Covid-19 vaccines may need to be updated”.

This would “ensure that (they) continue to provide WHO-recommended levels of protection against infection and disease by VOCs (variants of concern), including Omicron and future variants.”

Just weeks after Omicron was first detected in southern Africa, it is becoming increasingly clear that it is not only far more transmissible than previous variants, but also better at dodging some vaccine protections.

The WHO has so far given its stamp of approval to versions of eight different vaccines.

TAG-Co-VAC stressed that those vaccines provide a high level of protection against severe disease and death caused by the various variants of the virus. It said preliminary data indicated the existing vaccines were less effective at preventing symptomatic Covid-19 disease in people who have contracted the Omicron variant.

But protection against severe disease, which is what the jabs were especially intended to do, “is more likely to be preserved”, it said.

“However, more data on vaccine effectiveness, particularly against hospitalisation, severe disease and death, are needed, including for each vaccine platform and for various vaccine dosing and product regimens,” it said.

In the meantime, TAG-Co-VAC echoed the WHO’s stance that “the immediate priority for the world is accelerating access to the primary vaccination”.

The United Nations health agency has resisted the push in a growing number of countries to roll out blanket booster programmes in the battle against new concerning variants like Omicron.

The WHO says this makes no sense as many people in poorer nations are still waiting for a first jab, dramatically increasing the chance of new, more dangerous variants emerging.

So far, more than eight billion doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered in at least 219 territories, according to a count by Agence France-Presse.

But while over 67 per cent of people in high-income countries have received at least one jab, fewer than 11 per cent have in low-income countries, according to UN numbers.