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EXCLUSIVE

Covid-19: Booster dose will be needed in autumn to avoid winter surge, says government adviser

Elisabeth Mahase

A covid-19 booster vaccine is likely to be rolled out in the autumn to avoid another winter surge, the deputy chair of the government's vaccine advisory committee has told *The BMJ*.

Speaking on *The BMJ's* Talk Evidence podcast, Anthony Harnden of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation said he believed that the booster would be needed either to protect against a new variant or as a safety net, as the duration of protection is unknown.

"We certainly don't want to see a winter like we've seen this winter. And if we've got new variants circulating and we've got dropping levels of immunity due to the vaccination, then that becomes an imperative to do a booster," said Harnden, adding that the booster may be given to certain vulnerable groups or to the entire population.

He added, "I think we're likely to make a bold decision to recommend a booster dose, even if we haven't got all the evidence of the necessity, just because I think the consequences of not immunising with the booster dose are so big. If it's proved that it's needed months later it may be too late."

He suggested that the booster could be rolled out in August or September "rather than later in the year, because of this worry about a large third wave affecting the vulnerable elderly."

Annual vaccination

During the interview Harnden also tackled the question of whether the covid-19 vaccine could become an annual vaccination, like the flu programme.

"I suspect it's going to be likely that we're going to require an annual boost for a while," he said. "It just depends on the length of duration of protection. The virus mutates, [but it] probably doesn't mutate as much or as quickly as the influenza virus, so it's very difficult to predict whether this is going to be an annual vaccine or for how many years.

"But I certainly think it's going to be a booster shot this year."

The UK has reported more than 4.2 million cases of covid-19 and around 125 000 deaths, most of which occurred in the second half of 2020 and at the beginning of 2021.

Correction: We amended paragraph 2 of this story on 10 March 2021, as we had stated incorrectly that Anthony Harnden was chairing the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation during the pandemic.

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