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Covid-19: Vaccine centres operating at 30% capacity as young people stay away

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Covid-19 vaccination centres are working at 30% capacity because many young adults think they are “invincible” and don’t need the vaccine to protect themselves, a healthcare leader in London has said.

After an initial rush when vaccination slots were first opened up to younger age groups, likened to a sale for Glastonbury tickets,¹ interest has waned.

“We’ve had the challenge of having people and not vaccine; we’ve now got the flip of that, where we’ve got absolutely lots of vaccine and we don’t have the people coming forward,” Pippa Nightingale, chief nursing officer at Chelsea and Westminster NHS Foundation Trust, told a meeting of NHS North West London’s joint health overview and scrutiny committee on 14 July.

She said activity had “plummeted” this week. “Our vaccination centres are only really operating to about 30% of their capacity, because that’s the people that are turning up. We’ve got staff there, we’ve got vaccines there, but we are really struggling. That’s the picture across London; it’s also a picture across the country.”

The latest official vaccination figures, for the week to 4 July, show that across England 57% of 18-24 year olds had had their first dose but that uptake varied from 52% in London to 62% in the East of England.² A total of 755 148 first doses were given to people of all ages in the most recent week, down from 1 173 949 a week earlier.

Young adults had been expected to be a “tricky age group,” said Nightingale, and a lot of work had been done to try to predict how they would behave. “They have behaved exactly as we expected: they really do think they are resilient, they don’t need the vaccine, and they’re not going to be admitted to intensive care.”

Although young people can still come forward at any time to be vaccinated, Nightingale said the communications strategy was now to try to instil some urgency among those “sitting on the fence thinking they’re invincible” by telling them that “this might be their last chance.”

Young people seem to like “more of a festival event,” she added, so there will be vaccinations at Chelsea Football Club’s ground this weekend, supported by the players.

Anthony Harnden, deputy chair of the UK Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, agreed that the main reason vaccination coverage was lower in younger age groups was not supply issues but lower uptake, especially among young men. The figures for the week to 4 July show that among 18-24 year olds just 52% of men but 61% of women had

received a first dose and that in London uptake among men was just 46%.²

“It’s very important to make the vaccines accessible to young people, for clear messaging on social media, and for them to see role models promoting the vaccine,” said Harden, who has backed calls to engage members of the England football team in the campaign.

Though they are struggling to attract some young people for their first jab, vaccination centres are also turning away others trying to get their second sooner than the eight week interval. Some had been quite abusive and aggressive, Nightingale said. “It’s becoming challenging for staff in the vaccination centres.”

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said that in England over half of adults aged 18-24 had already received one dose and that the latest Office for National Statistics data indicated that 90% of adults under 30 have said they would come forward for a vaccine.

“We are continuing to do everything we can to boost uptake in younger people and urge all those who have yet to book their appointment to do so as quickly as possible to help protect themselves and their loved ones,” the spokesperson said.

- 1 NHS England. Half a million covid jabs booked in “Glastonbury rush” this morning. 8 Jun 2021. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2021/06/half-a-million-covid-jabs-booked-in-glastonbury-rush-this-morning>.
- 2 NHS England. Covid-19 vaccinations. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/covid-19-vaccinations>.

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