The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;374:n2248
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n2248>
 Published: 13 September 2021

Covid-19: Children aged 12-15 should be offered vaccine, say UK's chief medical officers

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All children aged 12 to 15 should be offered covid-19 vaccination, the UK's chief medical officers (CMOs) have said.

Setting out their advice to the government, the UK's four CMOs said they had made their recommendation¹ on "public health grounds" after considering the effect vaccination would have on transmission in schools and on children's education. "Having a significant proportion of pupils vaccinated is likely to reduce the probability of local outbreaks in, or associated with, schools," they wrote. "They will also reduce the chance an individual child gets covid-19. This means vaccination is likely to reduce (but not eliminate) education disruption."

The CMOs were asked by ministers to review the wider benefits of vaccinating 12-15 years olds after the UK's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) recommended against universal vaccination of this age group based purely on health grounds.²

But the CMOs concluded that "the additional likely benefits of reducing educational disruption, and the consequent reduction in public health harm from educational disruption, on balance provide sufficient extra advantage in addition to the marginal advantage at an individual level identified by the JCVI to recommend in favour of vaccinating this group"

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said the government would announce its decision shortly, having received the advice.

If—as expected—the government accepts the advice, around three million children aged 12-15 will be offered a single dose of the Pfizer covid-19 vaccine as soon as possible. The JCVI should advise on whether second doses may be necessary next year, once more data on this is available internationally, the CMOs said.

The CMOs said that matters of consent need to take into account that the risk-benefit is "not as clear cut" for children as it is for adults, and said it was "essential" that children and parents "are not stigmatised either for accepting, or not accepting, the vaccination offer."

Russell Viner, professor of child and adolescent health at UCL, described the announcement as "a good decision for young people and for broader society."

"Vaccinating 12-15 year olds remains a very marginal balance in medical terms, although with over 10 million teenagers vaccinated worldwide we are now much clearer about safety in this age group," he said.

In a statement, the Royal Society of Paediatrics and Child Health said vaccination could benefit healthy children by minimising disruption to their schooling, allowing them to mix more freely with their friends and giving more protection to friends and family.

But the college added, "Children, young people, and all of society will directly benefit from an increase in vaccination uptake in the adult population, particularly by those in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Tackling this pandemic, which is ongoing, does not depend on vaccinating children, who have already borne a great deal on behalf of us all."

The college also said, "It is extremely important that any covid-19 vaccination programme in schools does not interfere in any way with other school vaccination programmes where the health benefits are clear and have the potential to be lifesaving."

Speaking at *The BMJ's* recent webinar on vaccinating children, Adam Finn, professor of paediatrics at the University of Bristol, cautioned, "Taking away the people who normally immunise children with other vaccines to do this may further disrupt these programmes. It could ultimately result in more deaths from cervical cancer, meningitis, and flu. You can't do something without not doing something else."

A US preprint³ recently suggested that healthy boys aged 12-15 are more likely to experience rare cardiac adverse events such as myocarditis after their second dose of the Pfizer vaccine than from infection with the virus.

1 UK Chief Medical Officers. Universal vaccination of children and young people aged 12 to 15 years against covid-19. 13 September 2021. www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-vaccination-of-children-and-young-people-aged-12-to-15-years-against-covid-19.

2 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: JCVI opts not to recommend universal vaccination of 12-15 year olds. *BMJ* 2021;374:n2180. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n2180 pmid: 34479872

3 Tracy Beth Høeg T, Krug A, Stevenson J, et al. SARS-CoV-2 mRNA vaccination-associated myocarditis in children ages 12-17: a stratified national database analysis. *Medrxiv* 2021.08.30.21262866 [Preprint]. 2021doi: 10.1101/2021.08.30.21262866.

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