

Vaccination Hesitancy Grows Amid Little Abatement in Virus Cases

Seoul announces new 4-tier social distancing system

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Korea's new virus cases continued to stay around the 400-range on Friday, with the health authorities expressing concerns about possible resurgence amid the eased restrictions in the spring season.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KCDA) confirmed 398 new patients, including 381 local infections, down slightly from Thursday. The cumulative caseload rose to 91,638 as of midnight Thursday. Imported cases also decreased to 17 from 23.

The death toll stayed at a single-digit figure as the KCDA reported eight more fatalities, pushing the death toll to 1,627 with a fatality rate of 1.78 percent. An additional 398 patients fully recovered and returned to their everyday lives, increasing the total to 82,560. The country has tested 6,789,011 people since Jan. 3 last year.

With recent daily cases hovering around the 400-range, the nation is speeding up its vaccine rollout.

The health authorities have inoculated 225,853 people as of Friday - 221,944 with the AstraZeneca vaccine and 2,742 with Pfizer's vaccine. Officials also confirmed a steep uptick in side effects after injection by confirming 849 new cases on Friday. The total adverse reaction cases tied to the vaccination have risen to 1,558.

While most of them showed mild symptoms, such as fever and muscle pain, authorities have confirmed 13 suspected anaphylaxis cases, one seizure, and six deaths. All of the severe adverse reactions were related to AstraZeneca's vaccine.

Officials are investigating if the vaccine had any relations with severe side effects or deaths.

While the increase in side effects has increased concerns about the AstraZeneca vaccine among Koreans, especially older adults, more European countries have recently approved the AstraZeneca vaccine for senior citizens.

The German government approved AstraZeneca's vaccination for people over 65 on Thursday, and the Swedish and Austrian health authorities have also expanded vaccination

to people over 65. Hungary and Belgium also have decided to use AstraZeneca's vaccine for citizens over 60 and 55, respectively.

The upward adjustment of inoculation age for AstraZeneca's vaccine comes after Public Health England published a research result on Monday, which showed that the vaccine has a great preventive effect after three or four weeks of injection among the age group over 80 who received the first dose of the vaccine.

Various Korean medical associations also stressed that even people with underlying diseases, such as diabetes and respiratory diseases, need to receive the Covid-19 vaccine.

The Korean Diabetes Association has asked diabetes patients not to avoid vaccination opportunities and actively receive the jabs. "The way to prevent Covid-19 is to trust and participate in vaccinations administered under government approval," it said.

The Korean Academy of Tuberculosis and Respiratory Diseases also stressed patients with underlying diseases should receive the vaccine. Various scientific clinical trials have proven the effectiveness of the Covid-19 vaccine, while its side effects are rare and mostly mild.

Cheong Wa Dae also announced that President Moon Jae-in plans to receive AstraZeneca's vaccine this month to ease the public's resistance to vaccination. A Cheong Wa Dae spokesperson said that they would determine the exact vaccination timing for President Moon after taking into account his schedule of the G7 Summit scheduled for June 11.

On Friday, the government unveiled its plan to introduce AstraZeneca's vaccine for 1.05 million people from March to May.

"The government will introduce AstraZeneca's vaccine for about 350,000 people this month and about 700,000 people from April to May," Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said. "The KCDA should reschedule the vaccine schedule so that they can inoculate as many people as possible during the first half of the year."

Meanwhile, the government unveiled a draft plan of its new four-tier social distancing scheme on Friday. The country has been using a five-tier social distancing system since November.

Excluding some entertainment facilities, such as clubs, the government will allow businesses, such as coffee shops, restaurants, and movie theaters, to operate their shops even during Level 4, the new distancing plan's highest level.

The government has also changed the index for adjusting the distance stage from the weekly average daily confirmed cases to the weekly average daily number of patients per 100,000 people.

If the number is below 0.7, authorities will impose Level 1 distancing rules while setting Level 4 if the number is above three.

Therefore, if the government starts implementing the new measure, the country would be under a Level 2 scheme.

Regarding banning private gatherings, there is no restriction during Level 1.

However, the government will start banning private gatherings of more than eight people during the Level 2 scheme and require people to keep eight square meters apart.

During Level 3, the government will ban the private gathering of more than four people while advising citizens to stay home. Some businesses, such as karaoke, will have to close after 9 p.m.

In Level 4, health authorities will still allow private gatherings of less than four people. However, they will ban private gatherings of more than two people after 6 p.m.

Most businesses will also have to close down after 9 p.m, with some entertainment facilities, such as clubs, having to close down entirely.

While various authorities, such as the local and provincial government, and Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters, share the decision to implement Level 1 to 3 distancing scheme, only the headquarters can raise the distancing regime to Level 4.

The government plans to finalize the final draft within this month after coordinating opinions with related associations, ministries, and local governments for an additional one to two weeks.

However, they will implement the new distance system only when the Covid-19 epidemic stabilizes considerably throughout the country.

“The transition to the new system will ease quarantine measures, and there may be side effects if we start implementing the new scheme during a time when we do not know whether the Covid-19 epidemic will grow or slow down,” Ministry of Health and Welfare Spokesperson Son Young-rae said. “The government will start the new measures only if the nation reaches a Level 1 figure under the revised plan.”

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