Washington Examiner

Johnson & Johnson vaccine pause extended as CDC committee adjourns without decision

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April 14, 2021

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices adjourned its meeting on Wednesday without making any recommendation on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. In effect, that means that the vaccine pause put in place on Tuesday will continue.

Dr. Amanda Cohn, a member of the committee and a senior adviser to the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suggested the ACIP would meet again to discuss the issue in a week to 10 days.

ACIP is the body within the CDC charged with making recommendations on vaccines. While its recommendations do not have the force of law, they have long influenced which vaccines private insurers and the federal government will pay for.

The ACIP meeting came on the heels of the Tuesday announcement the Food and Drug Administration and CDC called for a pause in the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine after six women developed cerebral venous sinus thrombosis, a rare type of blood clot that usually results in stroke.

Many ACIP members expressed concern that there was not enough data at this point to make a decision.

“It would be helpful to have additional information,” said Lynn Bahta, an ACIP member and immunization program clinical consultant at Minnesota Department of Health. “By having more robust information, we can be much more confident about how we talk about the safety of this vaccine.”

Dr. Sandra Fryhofer, the American Medical Association liaison to the ACIP, suggested that the pause should continue so that “we can figure out if this is a needle in a haystack or tip of an iceberg.”

There were some dissenting voices.

“We are in a situation where not making a decision is tantamount to making a decision,” said Dr. Nirav Shah, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials liaison to the ACIP. “Any extension of the pause will invariably result in the fact that the most vulnerable individuals in the United States who were prime candidates for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine will remain vulnerable.”

On Tuesday, acting Director of the FDA Dr. Janet Woodcock said the pause was taken out of "an abundance of caution." One of the six women has died, and another is still in the hospital.

Officials argued that one reason the pause was needed was to help inform physicians on how to treat patients who have a vaccine-related blood clot.

"We need to make physicians aware of this," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said on Tuesday. "The pause not only allows us to take a look at the cases and learn more, but it is also a signal to help the physicians."

The risk of developing a blood clot from the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is low. Over 7.5 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine have been administered. If six people have had blood clots, that means the risk of a blood clot is about 1 in 1.25 million. By comparison, the chances of developing a blood clot among those hospitalized with COVID-19 is about 1 in 5.

Johnson & Johnson vaccines make up about 5% of shots given out so far, and it is unlikely that the pace of vaccination, which has averaged more than 3 million in the past week, will slow.

Jeff Zients, the White House COVID-19 response coordinator, said in a statement that Tuesday's "announcement will not have a significant impact on our vaccination plan."

But the longer the pause continues, the more damage it may do, especially to public confidence. It could increase the reluctance on the part of many people to get vaccinated.

"The news of the problem is probably doing all of the damage," said Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a general surgeon and senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. "There are already people out there who are hesitant to get vaccinated. This will make them even more hesitant."