

Private sector sees hope to finish unused shots

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With the government's decision to allow booster doses for certain categories of beneficiaries starting January 10, the private healthcare sector sees a bright opportunity for consumption of unused Covid-19 vaccine doses expiring in two months.

After the government's announcement of free shots in government vaccination centres earlier this year, the private sector suffered major losses after pre-purchase deals with vaccine manufacturers and also had to return thousands of doses to the states from which these were procured.

According to private hospitals, most of them are stockpiling Serum Institute of India's Covishield, which they purchased in bulk. "With the decision, now millions of doses of Covid-19 vaccines, especially Covishield, available with the private sector, would be effectively utilised for this purpose. After the government announced free vaccination at its Centres early this year, demand on private sector had severely come down," said Dr Girdhar Gyani, Director General, Association of Healthcare Providers (India) (AHPI), that represents the majority of healthcare providers in India.

"With announcement of providing booster/ precautionary dose, there will be renewed demand for vaccination, including on private sector, which incidentally has stock of vaccine available. Hence, the government's approval for precautionary or booster doses for eligible would enable these stocks gainfully utilised," he added further.

According to the Union Health Ministry data, more than 149.70 crore vaccine doses have been provided to States/UTs so far through the Government of India which is the free of cost channel and through direct state procurement category.

Interestingly, more than 16.93 crore balance and unutilised doses are still available with the States/UTs to be administered.

Several private hospitals had purchased vaccines in bulk but the uptake was recorded to be low.

“The government did a great job of vaccinating the adult population free of charge, there was reluctance in the general public to pay for the doses, since the vaccine manufacturers sold the vaccine to the private sector at nearly three to five times the price as compared to the government, leading to large stocks being left unutilised in cold storage with the private hospitals and diagnostic centres,” said Dr Harsh Mahajan, President, NATHEALTH, Healthcare Federation of India.

“It is hoped that these unused stocks would get utilised for booster doses, as the government has mandated that the third precaution dose would be same as the previous two doses,” he added.

Private vaccination centres in hospitals in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities started withdrawing their participation in the national Covid-19 vaccination program because of low uptake of the shots. Such hospitals hold that the expansion of the eligible category of people for vaccination may prove beneficial for all the vaccine holders, including states.

“There are more than 12 crore people whose second dose is due but they have not taken the vaccine. The vaccine uptake has reduced getting in fresh set of people and getting in a fresh set of community that needs this vaccine and boosters, especially the health care workers, it will lead to more uptake of the vaccine and make sure that we do not waste any vaccines due to expiry that was supposed to happen in the next two to three months,” argued Dr Shuchin Bajaj, Founder Director, Ujala Cygnus Group. As on Thursday, India’s cumulative Covid-19 vaccination count breached 144 crores.

According to the government, more than 90 per cent adult population in India has received one dose of Covid-19 vaccine and over 61 per cent of the country’s adult population has received both the doses.

As far as other countries are concerned in terms of Covid-19 vaccination coverage, over 74 per cent population of the US has received at least one dose and 62 per cent population has been fully vaccinated. UK has vaccinated over 77 per cent of its eligible population with one dose and covered around 70 per cent population with both the doses. Similarly, over 74 per cent eligible population in Germany has received at least one dose while 71 per cent population is fully vaccinated. *Business Today*