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Russia Touts 'Promising' Coronavirus Drug in Early Trials

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Russia's health minister said Wednesday that he expects to start clinical trials for possible coronavirus vaccines in June. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

Early clinical trials of an antiviral drug in Russia have given "promising" results in treating the new coronavirus, a joint venture announced Wednesday as Russia faced mounting Covid-19 cases.

Of 40 coronavirus patients who took a favipiravir pill, 60% tested negative for Covid-19 within five days compared to 30% in the control group, according to the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and the ChemRar biotechnology firm. Favipiravir works by blocking the ability of a virus to replicate inside a cell.

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"The ChemRar Group alongside RDIF will be able to start commercial deliveries of the drug as soon as the end of May" if it obtains registration, the joint venture said in a statement.

With 250 treatment courses produced and 1,500 more at the production stage, the venture said it has the capacity to manufacture up to 600,000 doses per year.

The early clinical trials at six medical centers in three cities will expand to 30 medical centers in eight Russian regions involving 330 patients.

The RDIF has invested 150 million rubles ($2 million) in funding for the project.

Russia's health minister said Wednesday that he expects to start clinical trials for possible coronavirus vaccines in June.

China has already completed clinical trials on favipiravir, which is the generic version of the Japanese firm Fujifilm's anti-flu drug Avigan, the country's science and technology ministry said in March. Two trials in the country found the drug shortened recovery time for patients.

Japan said it hopes to approve Avigan for coronavirus treatment this month if a clinical trial proves effective. India-based Glenmark Pharmaceuticals has advanced to phase three of favipiravir trials in the country.

Last month, the Russian government authorized hospitals to treat coronavirus patients with the untested malaria drug hydroxychloroquine, which studies have linked to potentially deadly side effects.

A BBC Russia report said in April that doctors in Moscow were being required to test hydroxychloroquine on themselves despite the side effects and the study's stated voluntary nature.

Russian scientists are testing vaccine prototypes for the new coronavirus and plan to start human trials of experimental vaccines in June.

Russia has confirmed 242,271 cases of coronavirus infections, placing it behind only the United States, and 2,212 deaths as of Wednesday. It has reported more than 10,000 new cases daily for the past 11 days.

AFP contributed reporting to this article.

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