

**THE TIMES OF ISRAEL**

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# Pfizer CEO hails 'obsessive' Netanyahu for calling 30 times to seal vaccine deal

Speaking with Israeli TV, Albert Bourla says kids under 16 likely to soon get okay for vaccines, younger children to be vaccinated by year's end

By **TOI STAFF**

11 March 2021, 9:48 pm



Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla speaks at a Pfizer manufacturing site, February 19, 2021, in Portage, Michigan. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla on Thursday praised Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "obsessive" efforts to secure a coronavirus vaccine deal for Israel and predicted that children younger than 16 will soon begin receiving his company's vaccine. "He called me 30 times," Bourla said of Netanyahu.

Speaking with Israel's Channel 12 news, Bourla said he believed it was "a question of weeks" until kids aged 12-16 could start receiving the vaccine, but stressed that it depended on FDA approval.

He also said he believes elementary school students will be eligible for the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine by year's end.

Pfizer recently enrolled over 2,000 children between the ages of 12 and 15 for clinical trials and hopes to have results within a few months. The vaccine currently has emergency approval for use in people 16 and older.

Bourla's comments came after the director-general of the Health Ministry estimated Israel will begin vaccinating children 12 and up against the coronavirus "around May-June." Chezy Ley said the decision will depend on clinical trials being conducted by vaccine-makers, which he hopes "will be over around the end of spring, or beginning of summer."



Vials of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv, December 20, 2020. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit)

On Wednesday, a top Israeli health official said Israel has given some 600 children between the ages of 12 and 16 in at-risk groups the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and has seen no significant side effects from the shot.

The Israeli children who have been approved by medical authorities for vaccination had known risk factors including obesity, diabetes, severe lung and heart disease, immunosuppression disorders and cancer, according to a report last month.

The Health Ministry has recommended vaccinating some teenagers age 12-15 against COVID-19 if they suffer from specific underlying conditions. The report did not say whether all of the children vaccinated in Israel were over the age of 12.

Infection among children and school reopenings was a central concern during Israel's third-wave virus outbreak. Children represent a larger proportion of infections than earlier in the pandemic, possibly due to new virus variants and the fact that a significant percentage of adults have been vaccinated.

Moderna has also started trials for children 12 and up, but says it is unlikely to have data on younger children until 2022.

The University of Oxford has announced a trial to test its AstraZeneca-produced COVID-19 vaccine on children as young as 6.

According to Health Ministry data released Thursday, over 5 million Israelis have received the first vaccine dose, of whom nearly 4 million have also received the second. Israel's total population is around 9.3 million.

Currently, several million Israelis are ineligible for the vaccine, most of them under the age of 16.

### **Impressed with Netanyahu's vaccine 'obsession'**

In the interview, Bourla said it was "very appropriate for humanity" that one country be chosen as a testing ground for the efficacy of Pfizer's vaccine.

"I was talking with several heads of state. I spoke with your prime minister, he convinced me that Israel is the place with the right conditions," Bourla said. "I was impressed, frankly, with the obsession of your prime minister. He



Students wearing face masks return to school in Yad Mordechai on March 7, 2021. (Flash90)

called me 30 times.”



Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla speaks with Israel's Channel 12 news in an interview aired on March 11, 2021. (Screen capture: Channel 12)

He also cited Israel's “extraordinary healthcare system... very high degree of economic data” and experience in dealing with crises.

Asked about Netanyahu's frequent claim ahead of the March 23 elections that only he can bring vaccines to Israel, Bourla stressed his company signs supply contracts with states, not individual leaders.

“We are not contracting with individual companies or organizations... The vaccines will be sold to every country, irrespective of who is the leader,” he said.

Bourla, the Greek-born son of Holocaust survivors, was set to arrive in Israel on March 8, just 15 days before the March 23 election, but last week delayed the trip.

“It was quite complicated as a trip... in the middle of the pandemic the logistics weren't always perfect, so we decided I'll stay here,” he said in the interview.

There had been earlier speculation that the trip had been postponed to avoid appearing to influence the national vote. Netanyahu has repeatedly touted his personal rapport with Bourla as a major reason Israel was able to secure large quantities of coronavirus vaccines so quickly.

Bourla confirmed receiving letters imploring him not to visit Israel ahead of the elections, as well as letters telling him to go through with the trip.

“My job is not to do politics,” he said, adding he has “zero intention” of interfering in the elections.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends the arrival of over 100,000 doses of the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine, at Ben Gurion Airport on December 9, 2020. (Abir Sultan/Pool Photo via AP)