



## Current Affairs of the Day

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- Vaccinating a population of 940 million
- GST Council to convene on May 28

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- Two killed in Kerala as cyclone intensifies
- AI begins zeolite cargo service



## Vaccinating a population of 940 million

**The story so far:** Many States have announced their intention to import COVID-19 vaccines through a global bidding process, and several tenders inviting Expression of Interest have been issued.

### Is the onus on States to procure vaccines?

1. The Centre is currently pursuing a 'Liberalised Pricing and Accelerated National Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy', under which it has left vaccination of people in the 18-44 years, age group, to the States from May 1.
2. State governments have to call for vaccine bids in an open market in the case of international imports and buy a limited domestic supply at prices fixed by the manufacturer.
3. Vaccine makers in the country are required to provide 50% of their production to the Centre to meet the needs of the 45-plus priority age group, besides 25% to the States, and leave the rest open for purchase by the private sector.
4. The strategy was submitted in the Supreme Court by the Centre in the suo motu case as a step taken in an effort to incentivise and grow vaccine manufacturing.

### Why do States need to import?

1. While the States will continue to get vaccines under the Central quota for those above 45 years, they must prepare for beneficiaries in the 18-44 years age group using their own resources; private hospitals will sell to the better-off sections, mainly in urban areas, using imports.
2. States are allowed to order only an approved number of domestically manufactured doses for the 18-44 years group, on a pro-rata basis fixed by the Central government based on a population estimate. Imports, therefore, come into play to meet the demand early.

### How do vaccine imports work?

1. In the Centre's scheme, an "incentivised" market will increase the number of manufacturers, and thus, the availability of vaccines, although the counter view is that the decentralised, unregulated procurement system will push up costs due to weak bargaining power, and with global shortages, only pave the way for profiteering.



2. Imports have to meet the norms stipulated by the Centre. After approval, these vaccines must be subjected to a bridging clinical trial in place of a local clinical trial, as per the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules, 2019.
3. Also, the first 100 beneficiaries must be assessed for safety outcomes for seven days, before a vaccine is rolled out as part of the vaccination programme.

## GST Council to convene on May 28

Centre, States likely to discuss the inclusion of petroleum products, levies on critical COVID supplies.

### Highlights:

1. The Goods and Services Tax Council will meet for the first time in more than seven-and-a-half months, setting the stage for the Centre and States to take up several pending as well as pressing issues relating to the indirect tax amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Apart from the possible inclusion of petroleum products under the GST regime to ease the tax burden that has pushed retail fuel prices to record levels, the Council is also expected to take up States' concerns on GST levies on critical COVID-19 supplies, including the 5% GST on vaccines.
3. The Council, which is expected to meet every quarter, had last met in early October. While States had been urging a meeting of the Council over the past couple of months.

### Compensation shortfalls

1. States are also expected to seek a discussion on the plans for meeting the GST compensation shortfalls that may arise this year too, as second-wave lockdowns dent economic activity afresh, as well as the estimated ₹63,000 crore due to them for last year's compensation.
2. After a fractious debate, the Centre had last year met ₹1.1 lakh crore of the compensation shortfall through special market borrowings that it lent to the States.
3. While GST collections for 2021-22 began with a record ₹1.41 lakh crore in April, most economists anticipate a moderation in revenue as more States impose curbs.



## Mucormycosis in COVID-19 patients

**The story so far:** Hospitals across the country have started to report a number of cases of mucormycosis, an invasive fungal infection affecting patients who have recently recovered from COVID-19. In common parlance, it also goes by the name 'black fungus', a direct reference to the blackening that is characteristic of the disease.

### What is mucormycosis?

Mucormycosis is an aggressive and invasive fungal infection caused by a group of moulds called mucormycetes. It can affect various organs but is currently manifesting as invasive rhino-orbito-cerebral disease, crawling through the sinus and working its way to the brain, affecting the ear, nose, throat, and mouth. While it is not contagious, it can cause a lot of damage internally and can be fatal if not detected early.

### What causes the disease?

Diabetes mellitus is the most common underlying cause, followed by haematological malignancies and solid-organ transplants, according to a comparative study of several papers on the incidence of mucormycosis in India, published in a recent issue of Microorganisms. Diabetes mellitus was reported in 54% to 76% of cases, according to a report.

What seems to be triggering mucormycosis in patients post COVID-19 is the indiscriminate use of a high dose of steroids in COVID-19 patients, sometimes even in minimally symptomatic patients. This leads to spikes in the sugar level among diabetics, which, in turn, renders them vulnerable. Rational use of steroids is necessary, and constant monitoring of sugar levels and resorting to insulin use to control these levels if required, is essential, he added.

The fungi are present in the environment, the use of nasal prongs and other devices for oxygen delivery and possible breach of sterile conditions can possibly lead to cross-infection and hospital-acquired infection.

### How can mucormycosis be prevented?

Following appropriate treatment protocols as recommended by the World Health Organization for COVID-19, including rational use of steroids and monoclonal antibodies only when they can help a patient, is important. It is important to keep



blood sugar levels under control and ensure that appropriate calibration of oral drugs or insulin is done from time to time, stressed.

## Two killed in Kerala as cyclone intensifies

Cyclonic storm Tauktae (pronounced Tau'te) in the Arabian Sea is expected to intensify into a very severe cyclonic storm, with wind speeds expected to touch 160 kmph.

### Highlights:

1. The storm moved northwards and lay about 250 km southwest of Panjim-Goa and 620 km south-southwest of Mumbai. The Lakshwadeep Islands and the Ghat districts of Tamil Nadu also received significant rain.
2. Rain is expected to intensify in coastal Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat over the next 48 hours, causing damage to plantations, thatched houses and roads.
3. Storms are common in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea in May, ahead of the monsoon onset though climatologists have said there is an increase in the number of such storms in the Arabian Sea in recent years. Tauktae is the fourth cyclone in as many years over the Arabian Sea in the pre-monsoon months. This is being attributed to a rise in average sea surface temperatures driven by global warming.

## Mars landing gives China's space programme a leg-up

Third country to achieve this feat after the Soviet Union, the U.S.

### Highlights:

1. China landed a spacecraft on Mars carrying its first Mars rover in a big boost to its space ambitions. China had in July last year launched its first Mars mission, called Tianwen-1, meaning Questions to Heaven, carrying a lander and rover.
2. A lander descended successfully onto the surface of the red planet carrying a rover named Zhurong, named after a god of fire for a planet known in Chinese as the planet of fire.



3. The rover will provide “first-hand materials for research on the planet’s space environment, surface topography, and soil structure. China’s leadership sees the space programme as an important part of China’s ambitions to close the technological gulf with the U.S.
4. China’s Mars mission, along with lunar mission and space station, is key to its space programme. In 2019, the fourth lunar probe, Chang’e-4, carried out the world’s first landing on the far side of the moon. The Mars mission was launched the following year.
5. China is also investing heavily in its manned space programme, as plans accelerate for its first space station, set to be functional by the end of next year and only the second space station after the International Space Station.

## AI begins zeolite cargo service

Govt. begins the process of importing zeolite for oxygen plants.

### Highlights:

1. National carrier Air India (AI) has begun the first of its “zeolite cargo flights”, with the Central government having commenced the process of importing zeolite from across the world for use in medical oxygen plants.
2. The government has appointed the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) as the charterer for these consignments. Under the Prime Minister’s Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) Fund, the DRDO is to set up these medical oxygen plants.
3. The technology uses the pressure swing adsorption process and molecular sieve zeolite in oxygen generation.
4. The technology would be especially useful in urban, remote and rural settings with the on-site generation of medical oxygen in a cost-effective manner.