

# COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

## 29th Dec 2021

---

### Lockdown Exit

---

#### **Madrid's free COVID tests struggle with demand as infections hit new high**

Demand for free COVID-19 testing kits provided by Madrid's regional government far outstripped supply on Tuesday, with long queues forming outside pharmacies as nationwide infections continued to climb amid the Omicron variant's rapid expansion. Spain's coronavirus infection rate hit a new record, rising to 1,360 cases per 100,000 people, measured over the preceding 14 days, from 1,206 cases reported on Monday, a five-fold rise since the beginning of December, according to health ministry data.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/madrids-free-covid-tests-struggle-keep-up-with-demand-2021-12-28/>

#### **Japan, China Vaccine Makers Under Fire for Third-World Trials**

Japanese drugmaker Shionogi & Co. sealed a deal to conduct a placebo-controlled trial of its Covid-19 vaccine in Vietnam and will be expanding it in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries, even as criticism of such tests mounts in the scientific community. The Osaka-based company began testing the efficacy of its shot in Vietnam from Dec. 25, a spokesman at Shionogi said Monday. Participants of the trial, which will eventually total 50,000 volunteers, need to be unvaccinated, the spokesman said, with two-thirds of them receiving the inoculation and others getting a placebo. The company is also planning to analyze whether it's effective against the omicron strain, the spokesman added.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-27/tardy-vaccine-makers-under-fire-for-trials-in-developing-nations>

#### **Greece expands restrictions to contain Omicron variant surge**

Greece on Monday announced further restrictions effective from Jan. 3-16 to contain a further upsurge in COVID-19 infections including the Omicron variant, targeting mainly night-time entertainment venues. As confirmed new COVID-19 cases surged to a record of 9,284 on Monday, resulting in 66 deaths, the health minister said that under the new measures, high-protection masks would be compulsory at supermarkets, public transport and eating establishments. Bars and restaurants will have to close at midnight and no standing customers at entertainment venues will be allowed. There will also be a maximum limit of six people per table.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-expands-restrictions-contain-omicron-variant-surge-2021-12-27/>

#### **Health experts say Italy faces paralysis under quarantine rules**

Health experts urged the Italian government on Monday to relax COVID-19 quarantine rules, saying that the country otherwise risked paralysis as the highly infectious Omicron variant spreads. Under current rules, people who have come into close contact with a COVID-19 sufferer have to self-isolate for seven days if they are vaccinated and for 10 days if they have not had a shot. Nino Cartabellotta, head of the Gimbe health foundation, said each positive person had, on average, five to 10 close contacts, and predicted that within two weeks some one million people in Italy might have come down with COVID-19.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/health-experts-say-italy-faces-paralysis-under-quarantine-rules-2021-12-27/>

#### **UK sets new record for COVID cases as Omicron sweeps London**

Britain reported another day of record COVID-19 cases on Friday, with new estimates showing swathes of London's population are carrying the virus, underlining the relentless advance of the

Omicron variant. Omicron's rapid spread has driven a surge in cases over the last seven days, especially in the capital. Around 1 in 20 Londoners likely had COVID-19 on Dec. 16 and early estimates - which could yet be revised - suggest this may have risen to 1 in 10 on Sunday, models from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed on Friday.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/one-10-londoners-likely-infected-with-covid-ons-models-2021-12-24/>

### **France Reports Record 100000 New Covid Cases as Omicron Rages**

France reported a daily record of more than 100,000 new coronavirus cases as President Emmanuel Macron weighs measures to contain the fast-spreading omicron variant. Covid-19 cases totaled 104,611 on Saturday, according to data from the public health office, topping the 94,124 infections logged the previous day. The country reported 84 deaths. Macron, who is widely expected to seek a second term in April's election, will convene his health defense council on Monday to discuss the coronavirus.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-25/france-reports-record-100-000-new-covid-cases-as-omicron-rages>

### **Pressure Mounts on India to Begin Boosters as Omicron Spreads**

India's government faces a growing clamor from business leaders and public health experts to launch a Covid-19 booster drive and begin vaccinating children as the nation braces for a surge of omicron-fueled infections. With ample vaccine supplies, India could begin inoculating those under 18 as well as administer third doses to front-line health care workers, the elderly and those at high risk since they got their first shots in early 2021, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, the founder and chair of Biocon Ltd. -- one of India's largest drugmakers -- told Bloomberg on Thursday. "We need a booster policy for sure," she said. "I really don't know what's holding it up -- it's got nothing to do with vaccine availability."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-24/pressure-mounts-on-india-to-begin-boosters-as-omicron-spreads>

### **Israel Plan to Push Ahead With Fourth Covid Jab May Be Scuttled**

Israel's plan to administer a fourth coronavirus vaccine dose to older adults and medical personnel may be delayed or abandoned if the country's top health official fails to sign off on the program. The plan, which would have made the country the first in the world to offer a fourth dose on such a widespread basis, was announced on Tuesday by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett following a recommendation from a panel of experts. The decision was based on a forecast showing that fast-paced spread of omicron would leave the population largely unprotected from infection.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-24/israel-plan-to-push-ahead-with-fourth-covid-jab-may-be-scuttled>

### **Universal Orlando reinstates mask rule as COVID cases rise**

Universal Orlando is reinstating its mask requirements beginning Christmas Eve as COVID-19 cases are surging as a result of the omicron variant. Daily cases of coronavirus have quadrupled in the past week in the state of Florida,

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-travel-lifestyle-arts-and-entertainment-d8c1e7b7c1e3b4e5b2cb5d15e9775383>

### **China puts city of 13 million in COVID lockdown before Olympics**

China has put a city of 13 million people into lockdown over an increase in coronavirus infections, just weeks before it is set to host the Winter Olympics. The restrictions in the city of Xi'an in the northeastern Shaanxi province took effect on Thursday, with no word on when they might be lifted. They are some of the harshest since China imposed a strict lockdown last year on more than 11 million people in and around the city of Wuhan, where the coronavirus was first detected in late 2019. One person from each household will be allowed out every two days to buy household

necessities, a government order said.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/23/china-puts-city-of-13-million-in-covid-lockdown-before-olympics>

### **German President Issues Pandemic Warning as Omicron Spreads**

Germany's head of state had little good cheer in his annual Christmas address to the nation, warning that the coronavirus will remain a challenge for Europe's largest economy. "The pandemic won't suddenly be gone one day," President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said in the text of a speech to be delivered on Saturday. "It will occupy us for a long time to come." The country's largely ceremonial head of state -- who's likely to secure a new five-year mandate in February -- reinforced a public call to get inoculated against Covid-19. He also exhorted Germans to rein in festivities and limit social contact to curb an expected exponential rise in new infections from the fast-spreading omicron variant.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-23/german-president-issues-pandemic-warning-as-omicron-spreads>

### **Bulgaria offers cash reward to boost vaccination rates among pensioners**

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said on Thursday that elderly people who get a COVID-19 shot will be eligible for a cash reward as part of his government's drive to boost the vaccination rates, the lowest in the European Union. Petkov, who took office this month, said every retired Bulgarian will get a one-off payment of 75 leva (\$43.40) in addition to their pension in the next six months when vaccinated with a first or second dose. Pensioners who have already received three shots will also be eligible for the add-on.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgaria-offers-cash-reward-boost-vaccination-rates-among-pensioners-2021-12-23/>

### **Ecuador makes COVID-19 vaccination obligatory**

Ecuador's government said on Thursday it has made it obligatory for eligible people to be vaccinated against COVID-19, amid an increase in cases and the circulation of new variants of the disease. About 12.4 million Ecuadoreans - or 77.2% of those aged 5 and over - have been fully vaccinated against the disease, the health ministry said in a statement. Indonesia, Micronesia, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan require vaccination for adults, and German and Austria will next year.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-makes-covid-19-vaccination-obligatory-2021-12-23/>

### **Greece cancels Christmas events, brings back mask mandate**

Christmas concerts and other events have been canceled in Greece under new restrictions announced Thursday that include a general mask mandate for outdoors and all public areas. Incoming travelers will also be required to have follow-up tests for COVID-19 on the second and fourth days after their arrival. The restrictions will take effect Friday as the country braces for the expected impact of the omicron variant of the coronavirus, with the public health service already under pressure and intensive care space at more than 90% capacity. "Due to the large amount of Christmas activity and crowded conditions that it creates, the mandatory use of masks is fully justified," Health Minister Thanos Plevris said during a live-streamed presentation of the measures, which will remain in effect at least through Jan. 3.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-europe-greece-8de2c9a777cd60be71c34350c2f122dc>

### **Pre-Christmas Omicron surge leads to record new British COVID cases**

Britain recorded a record number of new coronavirus cases on Thursday as the Omicron variant swept across the country, with the daily tally reaching 119,789 from 106,122 a day earlier. Many industries and transport networks are struggling with staff shortages as sick workers self-isolate, while hospitals in Britain have warned of the risk of an impact on patient safety. Omicron's rapid advance has driven a surge in cases in Britain over the last seven days, with the total rising by

678,165, government data showed.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-reports-record-119789-new-covid-19-cases-2021-12-23/>

### **French kids line up to get vaccine shots as omicron spreads**

French schoolchildren clung nervously to their parents as they entered a vast vaccine center west of Paris on Wednesday — then walked excitedly away with a decorated “vaccination diploma,” as France kicked off mass COVID-19 inoculations for children age 5 to 11. It’s not a moment too soon for the French government, which is facing the highest recorded infection rates since the pandemic began but trying to avoid a new lockdown. The health minister said Wednesday that the swiftly-spreading omicron variant is expected to be dominant in France by next week, but ruled out additional restrictions on public life for now. Officials are hoping that a surge in vaccinations will be enough to limit the mounting pressure on hospitals, where COVID-19 patients occupy more than 60% of beds.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-france-d07f70cdb9d7046b0cffa55d0a11a94>

## **Exit Strategies**

---

### **Undertakers, rabbis join global fight promoting COVID shots**

In Germany, Lutheran pastors are offering COVID-19 shots inside churches. In Israel’s science-skeptical ultra-Orthodox community, trusted rabbis are trying to change minds. And in South Africa, undertakers are taking to the streets to spread the word. The funeral directors' message: “We’re burying too many people.” A year after the COVID-19 vaccine became available, traditional public health campaigns promoting vaccination are often going unheeded. So an unconventional cadre of people has joined the effort. They are opening sanctuaries and going door to door and village to village, touting the benefits of the vaccines and sometimes offering shots on the spot.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/undertakers-rabbis-join-global-fight-promoting-covid-shots/ar-AASc95c>

### **U.S. CDC investigating nearly 70 cruise ships hit by COVID-19 cases**

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Monday it was investigating nearly 70 cruise ships after reports of COVID-19 cases on board, as the Omicron variant upended holiday travel over the Christmas weekend. The CDC said COVID-19 cases on 68 ships had met its threshold for an investigation.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-cdc-investigating-nearly-70-cruise-ships-hit-by-covid-19-cases-2021-12-27/>

### **Plans to sell off UK vaccine development centre criticised by scientists**

Ministers have been urged to retain a facility that can swiftly create and test new vaccines, amid concerns over the sale of a leading centre originally designed to prepare Britain for future pandemics. Some senior medical figures have privately raised concerns that government officials are examining bids for the Vaccine Manufacturing and Innovation Centre (VMIC), near Oxford, which has benefited from millions in public funding during its development. John Bell, who has held a series of influential roles in the government’s Covid-19 response, said that the centre’s vaccine manufacturing capabilities might be best placed in the hands of a large pharmaceutical company. However, he added that a facility looking at vaccine innovation and trialling – the original vision for VMIC – should be maintained.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/26/plans-to-sell-off-uk-vaccine-development-centre-criticised-by-scientists>

### **Dutch Travel to Germany, Belgium to Avoid Lockdown**

A new lockdown in the Netherlands has had an unexpected consequence: packed roads and shopping streets in neighboring Belgium and Germany. Faced with the spread of the omicron variant across Europe, the Dutch government introduced new restrictions on social contact on Dec. 19,

closing non-essential stores and shuttering hospitality businesses at 5 p.m. But some Dutch people haven't stopped shopping and celebrating. Instead, they simply moved these activities to countries where stores, restaurants and bars remain open.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-23/dutch-travel-to-germany-belgium-to-avoid-lockdown>

### **Pope's Message on Christmas: Prays for Vaccines for All**

Pope Francis prayed Saturday for an end to the coronavirus pandemic, using his Christmas Day address to urge health care for all, vaccines for the poor and for dialogue to prevail in resolving the world's conflicts. Amid a record-setting rise in COVID-19 cases in Italy this week, only a few thousand people flocked to a rain-soaked St. Peter's Square for Francis' annual "Urbi et Orbi" ("To the city and the world") Christmas address. Normally, the square would be packed with tens of thousands of holiday well-wishers.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-25/on-christmas-pope-prays-for-pandemic-s-end-peace-dialogues>

### **Ecuador mandates vaccines, Italy masks outdoors as Omicron rages**

Italy has reintroduced mandatory masks outdoors and Ecuador made vaccines compulsory for nearly all to combat coronavirus infections surging globally, led by the Omicron variant, days before the Christmas holidays. More stringent than most, China shut down a city of 13 million people to extinguish a tiny Delta variant outbreak, pursuing its zero COVID-19 goal, while Spain will require masks in some outdoor settings. Meanwhile, France and the United Kingdom announced record highs of COVID-19 daily infections. Vaccination has also been made mandatory in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Indonesia, Micronesia and New Caledonia for adults, while Greece said people must wear face masks both indoors and outdoors during Christmas and New Year's gatherings.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/ecuador-mandates-vaccines-italy-masks-outdoors-as-omicron-rages/ar-AAS6syq>

### **Making Green, Disposable Face Masks That Won't Become Ocean Plastic**

"Biodegradable masks will be a big market with a lot of demand from governments who are seeing what a big problem mask pollution is becoming," says Francois Dalibard, chief executive officer of Groupe Lemoine, a French company that manufactured 500 million face masks this year. "The first ones to offer it will have a big advantage."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-22/making-green-disposable-face-masks-that-won-t-become-ocean-plastic>

### **Merck (MRK) Covid Drug Molnupiravir Gains US Clearance for High-Risk Adults**

Merck & Co.'s Covid-19 pill was cleared by U.S. regulators Thursday, giving high-risk patients a second at-home treatment just as the omicron variant is causing cases to surge around the country. The drug, molnupiravir, received emergency authorization on the heels of Pfizer Inc.'s Covid pill being cleared Wednesday. The FDA said Merck's drug is not recommended for use in pregnant people. The two treatments hold the potential to keep a sharp rise in infections from overwhelming U.S. hospitals. Molnupiravir, developed by Merck with partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics LP, is intended to be used at home to treat Covid in people 18 and older at risk of developing severe illness. A study showed it reduced the risk of hospitalization or death among adults with mild to moderate disease by 30%.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-23/merck-covid-pill-gains-u-s-clearance-for-high-risk-adults>

### **Omicron up to 70% less likely to need hospital care**

People catching Omicron are 50% to 70% less likely to need hospital care compared with previous variants, a major analysis says. The UK Health Security Agency says its early findings are "encouraging" but the variant could still lead to large numbers of people in hospital. It also shows the vaccine's ability to stop you catching Omicron starts to wane 10 weeks after a booster dose. Protection against severe disease is likely to be far more robust. The report comes hot on the heels

of data from South Africa, Denmark, England and Scotland which all pointed to reduced severity.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/omicron-up-to-70-25-less-likely-to-need-hospital-care/ar-AAS5XAH>

### **United, Delta cancel more than 200 U.S. Christmas Eve flights amid COVID surge**

United Airlines and Delta Air Lines have canceled hundreds of Christmas Eve flights, as the spreading COVID-19 Omicron variant takes a toll on its flight crews and other workers. Chicago-based United on Thursday canceled 120 flights for Friday, while Atlanta-based Delta said it had canceled about 90. Both said they were working to contact passengers so they would not be stranded at airports. FlightAware on Friday said United has now canceled 169 flights on Christmas Eve and Delta has canceled 127, along with another 50 canceled flights for United on Christmas and 89 for Delta.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/united-delta-cancel-more-than-200-us-christmas-eve-flights-amid-covid-surge/ar-AAS6qfz>

### **AstraZeneca's Vaccine, Dumped by the West, Helps Fill Gaping Need in Rest of World**

AstraZeneca PLC's Covid-19 vaccine isn't authorized in the U.S., and governments in Canada, Australia and across Western Europe have shunned it after production problems and rare but sometimes-deadly side effects. In much of the rest of the world, though, it is a crucial workhorse vaccine, reaching more people in lower- and lower-middle-income countries than any other Western-made shot. It also has run neck and neck with a shot by China's Sinovac Biotech Ltd. and one developed by Pfizer Inc. and Germany's BioNTech for overall doses distributed globally. AstraZeneca delivered nearly 2.3 billion doses globally as of mid-December, according to the company. Sinovac said it delivered more than 2.4 billion doses, compared with nearly 2.5 billion by Pfizer, according to the company.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/astrazenecas-vaccine-dumped-by-the-west-helps-fill-gaping-need-in-rest-of-world-11640361603>

### **Overwhelmed U.S. Midwest hospitals prepare for worst with Omicron**

The rapid spread of Omicron infections has hospitals in the U.S. Midwest "preparing for the worst," with their intensive care units and medical personnel already severely strained from a wave of the potent Delta variant of COVID-19. Indiana, Ohio and Michigan have been hit harder in recent weeks by the virus than any other states. About one in four of their hospital beds are occupied by COVID-19 patients, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data. The impact is even greater in their intensive care units, where COVID-19 patients now account for one-third or more of the beds, according to HHS.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/overwhelmed-us-midwest-hospitals-prepare-worst-with-omicron-2021-12-23/>

### **Singapore Is No Place to Spend Quarantine**

Imagine this: You test positive for Covid-19 and begin self-isolating at home. It's Day Two of quarantine and you're happier than Kevin McCallister in "Home Alone." You've already completed a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle and binged the entire second season of "Emily in Paris" on Netflix. Everything is just peachy — until some authorities in hazmat suits barge in on you, half-naked with a pint of Ben & Jerry's in your hands. You barely have time to grab your belongings before they whisk you into a van that's hotter than the Totino's pizza rolls you burned your mouth on earlier that day.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-12-23/omicron-in-singapore-travel-and-quarantine-policies-are-self-defeating>

### **France Has Record New Covid-19 Cases as Omicron Spreads**

French Covid-19 infections hit a record as the spread of the more easily transmissible omicron variant gathered pace across much of Europe. New daily cases totaled 91,608 in France on Thursday, public health office data show. That surpassed the previous high of almost 87,000 from November of last year. Health Minister Olivier Veran said earlier this week that the omicron strain

will become dominant in France during the period between Christmas and New Year's, and that infections will likely reach 100,000 a day by the end of December. On Thursday, he said the threshold will probably be crossed closer to Dec. 25 than Dec. 31, BFM TV reported

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-23/france-has-record-new-covid-19-cases-as-omicron-spreads>

### **Calls Mount to Cut Covid-19 Quarantine Period for Fully Vaccinated Who Test Negative**

More health experts, business people and government officials are questioning how long people infected with Covid-19 should quarantine if they are vaccinated and no longer testing positive. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that people with Covid-19 should isolate for 10 days from the first day symptoms develop or from a positive test, to prevent spreading the virus. On Thursday, the agency issued new guidelines for healthcare workers, reducing their recommended isolation time. The move comes as some researchers and business leaders have started calling for a shorter timetable for all fully vaccinated people who have cleared their infections, saying it is supported by a growing body of research and rising numbers of vaccinations and rapid tests.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/calls-mount-to-cut-covid-19-quarantine-period-for-fully-vaccinated-who-test-negative-11640283882>

### **Zambia to introduce COVID-19 booster jabs next week**

Zambia will introduce COVID-19 booster vaccines as it battles the respiratory disease which has infected over 200,000 people and killed more than 3,000, Health Minister Sylvia Masebo said on Thursday. The southern African nation also plans to start vaccinating children aged 12-17, who until now have not been eligible for the COVID-19 jab, Masebo said at a media briefing. "Zambia will begin to administer the booster vaccines for COVID-19 commencing on 27th December, 2021," Masebo said.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/zambia-introduce-covid-19-booster-jabs-next-week-2021-12-23/>

## **Partisan Exits**

---

### **Hong Kong Finds Suspected Local Omicron Case in Airport Cleaner**

Hong Kong has detected a suspected omicron case in an airport cleaner, marking the first time the more infectious variant has jumped through the city's fortress-like border controls and infected a person living in the community who hasn't recently traveled. The 64-year-old man who cleaned toilets designated for use by new arrivals thought to be infected with Covid-19 has himself tested preliminarily positive, according to the government statement. Initial tests suggest he is carrying the omicron variant, though whole genome sequencing is needed to confirm the findings. He appears to be the first person in Hong Kong who hasn't recently traveled and yet contracted the highly infectious omicron variant.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-24/hong-kong-finds-suspected-local-omicron-case-in-airport-cleaner>

### **White House says it is 'grateful' Trump got, promoted COVID-19 booster shot**

The White House is grateful that former U.S. President Donald Trump received and promoted getting the COVID-19 vaccine booster shot, press secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday. The Republican former president recently said in an interview that he received a booster shot, and called the COVID-19 vaccines "one of the greatest achievements of mankind." "The ones that get very sick and go to the hospital are the ones that don't take the vaccine," Trump said in an interview with conservative commentator Candace Owens. "If you take the vaccine, you're protected."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/white-house-says-still-working-finalize-contracts-us-orders-covid-19-tests-2021-12-23/>

### **Italy bans New Year events as COVID infections surge**

Italy has tightened restrictions to curb surging COVID-19 infections, including banning all public New Year's Eve celebrations, as daily infections hit a record high, the government said on Thursday. Health Minister Roberto Speranza said mask wearing would be compulsory outdoors again and ordered people to use the more protective Ffp2 face masks on public transport and in public places, such as theatres, cinemas and at sports events. In addition, concerts and open-air events will be banned until Jan. 31, and discos and dance clubs will have to shut their doors until that date, in an effort to prevent mass socialising during the holiday period.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italy-set-tighten-covid-curbs-rein-infections-statement-2021-12-23/>

## **Continued Lockdown**

---

### **South Africa recalls new isolation and quarantine rules**

South Africa has recalled rules that no longer required people without symptoms of COVID-19 to isolate or test if they have been in contact with a positive case, the government announced on Tuesday, saying an amended circular will be re-issued. Last week the health ministry said that asymptomatic individuals who had been in contact with a case of COVID-19 no longer had to isolate but should monitor for symptoms for 5-7 days and avoid attending large gatherings.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-recalls-new-isolation-quarantine-rules-2021-12-28/>

## **Scientific Viewpoint**

---

### **Australia records first Omicron death, authorities stick to reopening plan**

Australia reported its first confirmed death from the new Omicron variant of COVID-19 on Monday amid its biggest daily surge in infections, but the authorities refrained from imposing new restrictions saying hospitalisation rates remained low. The death, a man in his 80s with underlying health conditions, marked a grim milestone for the country which has had to reverse some parts of a staged reopening after nearly two years of stop-start lockdowns, due to the fresh outbreak. Omicron, which health experts say appears more contagious but less virulent than previous strains, began to spread in the country just as it lifted restrictions on most domestic borders and allowed Australians to return from overseas without quarantine, driving case numbers to the highest of the pandemic.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/australia-records-first-omicron-death-authorities-stick-reopening-plan-2021-12-27/>

### **Unvaccinated 60 times more likely to end up in ICU with Covid, new research says**

Unjabbed people who catch Covid are up to 60 times more likely to end up in an intensive care ward than those who have been vaccinated, figures reveal. The startling data also shows the difference between the jabbed and unjabbed needing intensive care is starkest among older people - who are more likely to suffer more seriously from Covid. Figures from the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC), which covers hospital units in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, show that between May and November the rate of admission for double-jabbed Covid sufferers in their 60s was just 0.6 cases per 100,000 people per week. But among unjabbed people of the same age the rate was 37.3 per 100,000 per week - equating to a relative risk about 60 times higher

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/unvaccinated-60-times-more-likely-25790825>

### **Latin America Is Now a World Leader in Vaccinations**

Latin America, once a hot spot of Covid-19 deaths, now leads the U.S. and much of the world in vaccinations, as supply concerns have eased and health policy makers rush to shield their countries from new variants roiling other regions. Applying a mix of Chinese, European and American vaccines, about 62% of South America's population has received two shots or the single dose by Johnson & Johnson. That is more than the 60% of Europeans inoculated with two doses, the 56% of people in North America and the 54% in Asia, according to Our World in Data, a pandemic research project at the University of Oxford. Only Australia has fully vaccinated a bigger percentage of its people.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/latin-america-is-now-a-world-leader-in-vaccinations-11640428207>

### **India to Vaccinate Teens, Offer Boosters, Modi Says**

India will begin vaccinating teenagers from the ages of 15 to 18 from Jan. 3 and also administer booster vaccine doses for health-care workers a week later, as omicron-fueled Covid-19 cases spike, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said. Citizens who are older than 60 years and suffer from comorbidities can also get booster shots of Covid vaccines in January, Modi said in a televised national address. "India needs to be vigilant about the spread of the coronavirus," Modi said, adding that people should not pay attention to rumors nor panic about rising infection numbers. India has so far reported 415 cases of omicron infections from across 17 states, according to the latest data from the federal Health Ministry Saturday. The South Asian nation's confirmed Covid cases so far total nearly 34.8 million.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-25/india-to-start-vaccinating-teenagers-booster-for-health-workers>

### **Vallance hits back at Tory accusations of Omicron fear-mongering**

The UK government's chief scientific adviser has hit back at accusations from Conservative MPs that epidemiological modellers had "spread gloom" about the Omicron variant. Sir Patrick Vallance said it was not the responsibility of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) "to take a particular policy stance or to either spread gloom or give Panglossian optimism". He used an article in the Times to respond to criticism that was widely circulated among Tory MPs and ministers that suggested Sage's Omicron modelling had been an exercise in fear-mongering. The Spectator's editor, Fraser Nelson, had a Twitter exchange with the Sage member Graham Medley over the weekend, suggesting ministers asked Sage to model worst-case scenarios. The exchange was reportedly widely shared in the WhatsApp groups of Tory MPs.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/vallance-hits-back-at-tory-accusations-of-omicron-fear-mongering>

### **S.Africa Omicron data should not be extrapolated to all countries- Africa CDC**

Data from South Africa which suggests the Omicron coronavirus variant is 70% to 80% less severe than Delta should not be extrapolated to all countries, the head of the Africa Centres for Disease Control (CDC) said on Thursday. A South African study published on Wednesday found that people diagnosed with Omicron in the country in October and November were 80% less likely to be admitted to hospital than those diagnosed with another variant in the same period.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-data-suggests-omicron-mild-should-not-be-extrapolated-africa-cdc-2021-12-23/>

### **CDC cuts quarantine time for healthcare workers amid Omicron surge**

Healthcare workers in the United States who test positive for COVID-19 but are asymptomatic can return to work after seven days in isolation, provided they test negative, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Thursday. The new guidance cuts the quarantine time from a previously recommended 10 days, which the CDC said was in preparation for an anticipated increase in Omicron cases. Omicron now accounts for 73% of coronavirus infections in the United States, the CDC said on Monday. The CDC said the quarantine time can be cut further if there are staffing shortages due to COVID-19, adding that healthcare workers who have been fully vaccinated, including a booster, do not need to quarantine at home following high-risk exposures.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/cdc-cuts-quarantine-time-7-days-healthcare-workers-amid-omicron-surge-2021-12-23/>

### **China's Sinovac COVID-19 booster weaker against Omicron- Hong Kong study**

Three doses of Sinovac's CoronaVac COVID-19 vaccine do not produce adequate levels of antibodies to fight the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, researchers from Hong Kong said in a statement. Their analysis revealed Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was more effective, as a third dose of the shot

administered after two doses of the same or China's Sinovac vaccine provided "protective levels" of antibody against Omicron. Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech have said their three-shot course was able to neutralise the new Omicron variant in a laboratory test.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-sinovac-covid-19-booster-weaker-against-omicron-hong-kong-study-2021-12-23/>

### **Omicron Study in U.K. Bolsters Evidence of Lower Hospital Risks**

Omicron appears to be less severe but more contagious than any other Covid-19 strain to date, a U.K. government study concluded, bolstering research that has shown a lower risk of hospitalization from the fast-spreading variant. People infected with omicron are 50% to 70% less likely than those with delta to be admitted to hospitals, the U.K. Health Security Agency said Thursday. Omicron patients are also 31% to 45% less likely to arrive at emergency departments than those with delta. The agency's data came with an important caveat: While a booster shot improves protection against omicron, its effectiveness starts to wane more rapidly than with delta and is 15% to 25% lower starting 10 weeks after the third dose. The agency also cautioned that the new variant is so infectious that it could still produce significant numbers of severe cases.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-23/omicron-study-in-u-k-bolsters-evidence-of-lower-hospital-risks>

### **U.S. pauses allocation of Regeneron, Lilly COVID-19 antibodies**

The U.S. government has paused the distribution of COVID-19 antibody treatments from Regeneron Pharmaceuticals and Eli Lilly, saying the therapies were unlikely to be effective against the Omicron coronavirus variant. The variant has become the dominant strain in the United States with lightning speed, resurrecting restrictions and stretching the country's testing infrastructure. The halt on the allocation of the therapies will continue until new data emerges on their efficacy, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the office of Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response said in a joint statement on Thursday

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-pauses-allocation-regeneron-lilly-covid-19-antibodies-2021-12-23/>

### **Australia Brings Forward Booster Shots Amid Omicron Outbreaks**

Australia has brought forward implementing third-dose booster shots for Covid-19 as the nation battles outbreaks of the omicron variant. From Jan. 4, Australians will be able to get their booster shot four months after receiving their second dose, narrowing the current five-months wait time, Health Minister Greg Hunt said in Canberra. From Jan. 31, the gap will be cut again to three months. "These dates have been set out of an abundance of caution to give Australians early continued protection," Hunt said. About 91% of Australians aged 16 and over have had two jabs, he said.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-23/australia-brings-forward-booster-shots-amid-omicron-outbreaks>

### **New U.K. Study Reinforces Conclusion That Omicron Causes Less Severe Disease**

People infected with the Omicron variant of coronavirus are between 50% to 70% less likely to be admitted to the hospital than those who caught earlier strains, according to a new U.K. study that adds to a growing body of evidence of Omicron's reduced severity in populations with high levels of immunity. The analysis from England, published Thursday by the U.K.'s Health Security Agency, follows studies in Scotland and South Africa that also pointed to a substantially lower risk of hospitalization with Omicron than with more established variants, including Delta. Scientists are still unsure how these encouraging findings around hospitalizations will stack up against Omicron's much increased transmissibility, and ability to partially evade the protection of vaccines. The risk, they say, is the variant could still cause a big wave of hospital admissions simply by infecting many more people.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-k-study-finds-risk-of-hospitalization-with-omicron-50-to-70-lower-than-with-delta-11640281553>

### **FDA Authorizes Merck's Covid-19 Pill for At-Home Treatment**

U.S. regulators cleared use of a Covid-19 pill from Merck and partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics LP, the latest easy-to-use therapy that infected people can take to keep out of the hospital. The authorization by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration permits doctors to prescribe the drug, called molnupiravir, to adults at high risk of severe disease shortly after they develop mild to moderate symptoms. The FDA recommended using the Merck drug only if other authorized drugs aren't available and medically appropriate. Health experts have raised safety concerns about the Merck drug, which also was less effective in testing than an antiviral from Pfizer Inc. On Wednesday, the FDA cleared the Pfizer pill, Paxlovid, also for people to take at home to try to stay out of the hospital. The authorization by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration permits doctors to prescribe the drug, called molnupiravir, to adults at high risk of severe disease shortly after they develop mild to moderate symptoms. The FDA recommended using the Merck drug only if other authorized drugs aren't available and medically appropriate. Health experts have raised safety concerns about the Merck drug, which also was less effective in testing than an antiviral from Pfizer Inc. On Wednesday, the FDA cleared the Pfizer pill, Paxlovid, also for people to take at home to try to stay out of the hospital.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/fda-authorizes-mercks-covid-19-pill-for-at-home-treatment-11640270142>

### **COVID: Study suggests AstraZeneca booster works against Omicron**

AstraZeneca has said that a third dose of its COVID-19 vaccine "significantly" lifted antibody levels against the Omicron coronavirus variant, citing data from a new laboratory study. Findings from the study, yet to be published in a peer-reviewed medical journal, match those from rivals Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, which have also found a third dose of their shots works against Omicron.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/23/astrazeneca-says-booster-jab-works-against-omicron-study-finds>

### **South African health regulator approves J&J COVID-19 boosters**

South Africa's health regulator on Thursday approved the use of Johnson & Johnson vaccine for a second dose or booster, paving the way for the shot widely used in South Africa to shore up protection against the Omicron variant. The country already announced in December that it was preparing to offer people booster doses of both the Pfizer and J&J shots, but it did not specify when J&J boosters would be available. The South African Health Products Authority (SAPHRA) said in a statement on Thursday that it had approved J&J shots for use as a second dose or booster at least two months after the completion of the person's primary vaccination, with either J&J's single-shot course or another approved mRNA COVID-19 vaccine.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-african-health-regulator-approves-jj-covid-19-boosters-2021-12-23/>

## **Coronavirus Resurgence**

---

### **Spain's COVID-19 infections soar after Christmas**

Spain's coronavirus infection rate exceeded 1,000 cases per 100,000 people for the first time on Monday, stoked by the fast-spreading Omicron variant, although hospitals were under much less strain than in previous waves of the pandemic. The rate, measured over the preceding 14 days, rose to 1,206 cases following the Christmas weekend, according to health ministry data. That compares with 911 reported on Thursday, when it first topped the previous record of 900 cases set in late January. The tally had not been updated since Thursday and has added 214,619 new cases to the 5,932,626 recorded since the start of the pandemic.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spains-covid-19-infections-soar-after-christmas-2021-12-27/>

### **Malaysia Suspects First Local Omicron Case as Variant Spreads**

The probable local case was reported in the Borneo state of Sarawak on Dec. 24 in a 38-year old Chinese national, Khairy said in a briefing on Saturday. The individual has been working with a local engineering company for three years and hasn't traveled abroad during that period; he has also

been fully vaccinated. The cause of the infection is not known and investigations are still ongoing, Khairy said. New cases may climb in the coming weeks in view of the suspected local omicron case, and the government will next week announce the shortening of the booster shot interval to curb the spread of the new variant, he added. About half of the 61 imported cases are from Saudi Arabia, followed by five from the U.K, four from Qatar and three from the U.S. The U.K, U.S, Saudi Arabia, Denmark, Australia, France, Norway, India, Canada and Nigeria have high risk omicron and travelers coming from these countries must wear a digital tracker: Malaysia's local cases have plunged from a daily high of more than 22,000 in late August to about 3,500 this week. Still, imported cases -- most of them omicron -- have risen rapidly to about 100 daily since Wednesday, according to data from the health ministry. The government's attempts at managing the pandemic hit a speed bump after parts of peninsular Malaysia suffered the worst flooding in years last weekend; on Thursday, 15 positive cases were found among the victims seeking shelter at evacuation centers, taking the total to 405, the health ministry said.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-25/malaysia-suspects-first-local-omicron-case-as-variant-spreads>

### **Singapore Finds New Omicron Cluster, Braces for Community Spread**

Singapore confirmed a new cluster of Covid-19 cases linked to the omicron variant, warning that it expects to see the highly-transmissible strain spread in the community. The primary case in the confirmed cluster at The Vinyl Bar in the city was a passenger who flew in using Singapore's quarantine-free vaccinated travel lane on Dec. 14. He tested negative upon arrival but received a positive result in a further government-mandated test four days later. Nine more people are linked to the cluster. All are fully vaccinated and have mild or no symptoms, the ministry of health said. The confirmed cases and their close contacts will be placed in quarantine.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-25/singapore-finds-new-omicron-cluster-braces-for-community-spread>

### **Dominican Republic reports first case of COVID-19 Omicron variant**

The Dominican Republic has identified its first case of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, the health ministry of the Caribbean country said on Saturday. In a statement on Twitter, the ministry said Omicron had been identified in a person with mild symptoms who had arrived in the country from South Africa. The ministry also said it had later been informed by Chilean authorities that a person who traveled to Chile from the Dominican Republic had tested positive for Omicron. Other potential cases of Omicron are under investigation, the ministry added.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/dominican-republic-reports-first-case-covid-19-omicron-variant-2021-12-26/>

## **New Lockdown**

---

### **China's Xian locks down its 13 mln residents as COVID-19 cases rise**

Rising COVID-19 infections in China's city of Xian have spurred a lockdown of its 13 million residents, with stretches of highway eerily bare on Thursday, as many people queued in the cold to get their noses swabbed at testing sites. The daily count of domestically transmitted infections with confirmed symptoms in the northwestern city, famed for its terracotta warriors buried with China's first emperor, has increased for six straight days since Dec. 17. That takes the tally of local cases to more than 200 over the period from Dec. 9 to 22, smaller than many outbreaks outside China. No Omicron infection has yet been found in Xian, capital of the northwestern province of Shaanxi.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-reports-100-new-covid-19-cases-dec-22-vs-77-day-earlier-2021-12-23/>