

COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

16th Dec 2021

Lockdown Exit

U.S. universities move final exams online as COVID-19 spreads anew

A growing number of U.S. colleges and universities were moving final exams online and cancelling non-essential gatherings as the rapidly spreading Omicron coronavirus variant sent people in droves to medical clinics to be tested in scenes reminiscent of the early days of the pandemic. Many schools were reassessing campus policies as confirmed cases of the Omicron variant turned up in at least 36 states, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said at a briefing on Wednesday. The Delta variant remains responsible for the vast majority of cases, she added

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-universities-move-final-exams-online-covid-19-spreads-anew-2021-12-15/>

Shortage of vaccinated nannies adds fuel to US childcare crisis

As if working parents didn't have it hard enough during the pandemic, now a shortage of vaccinated nannies, babysitters and day-care workers is making the seemingly impossible quest to find child care even harder. Almost every parent who comes to Tiny Treasures Nanny Agency, which makes nationwide placements, are seeking vaccinated providers. Yet, just 60% of the nannies looking to get work through the company have gotten the shots, according to founder Ruka Curate. The mismatch is creating a feeding frenzy for fully vaccinated, qualified nannies, driving hourly rates to eye-poppingly high levels. Six-figure jobs that two years ago would have been filled in a day are now met with resistance from inoculated child-care workers who realize they can ask for more money, Curate said.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/12/15/shortage-of-vaccinated-nannies-adds-fuel-to-us-childcare-crisis>

UK reports highest daily COVID cases, 'staggering' rise feared

The United Kingdom has recorded its highest daily coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic as a further 78,610 COVID-19 infections were reported, about 10,000 more than the previous high reported in January.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/uk-reports-highest-daily-covid-cases-e2-80-98staggering-e2-80-99-rise-feared/ar-AARQIN9>

Inside the Botswana lab that discovered Omicron

The day that Dr Sikhulile Moyo ruefully calls "Omicron Day" started like any normal day, or as normal as one can be for a medical virologist in the middle of a global coronavirus pandemic. That Friday morning, November 19, the 48-year-old Zimbabwean prayed as usual with his wife and children, wolfed down some cereal and then raced to beat the traffic in Botswana's capital Gaborone. Later that day... "There were four sequences showing very strange patterns that we had never seen before. I felt a lot of emotions in my heart," says Dr Moyo, recalling rising feelings of concern. On the computer, mismatches in the samples' genetic code against the original SARS-CoV-2 virus had been flagged across rows of multicoloured letters. The discrepancies were so great that Dr Moyo worried there was some kind of mistake. But after the team ran thorough quality checks, they still came up with the same results. "It was quite alarming to us simply because we'd never seen such a lineage in Botswana," adds Choga. "It was heavily mutated."

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/12/14/inside-the-botswana-lab-that-discovered-omicron>

Omicron spreading so fast it threatens Britain's hospitals

The omicron variant is spreading so rapidly it has the potential to overwhelm Britain's hospitals, highlighting the need to strengthen coronavirus restrictions and speed up the delivery of booster vaccine shots, the country's health minister said Tuesday. Omicron is so transmissible that even if it proves to be less severe than other variants, there is still likely to be a surge in hospital admissions if it goes unchecked, U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers. His comments came as the government rushed to accelerate the national vaccination program, with a goal of offering a booster dose to every adult by the end of December.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-europe-london-england-9a2793178ffdd8859e9cff252dde8433>

UK COVID cases hit record; Top doctor warns of worse to come

Professor Chris Whitty described the current situation as two epidemics in one — with omicron infections rising rapidly even as the country continues to grapple with the older delta variant, which is still causing a large number of infections. Public health officials expect omicron to become the dominant variant across the U.K. within days. Omicron already accounts for a majority of cases in London. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. While scientists are still studying the risks posed by the highly transmissible omicron variant, Witty said the public should be braced for the figures to continue rising in coming weeks. "There are several things we don't know," Whitty said. "But all the things we do know are bad, the principal one being the speed at which this is moving. It is moving at an absolutely phenomenal pace."

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-europe-london-boris-johnson-c0cc2eda79f94bde2762d946744285fa>

US faces a double coronavirus surge as omicron advances

The new omicron coronavirus mutant speeding around the world may bring another wave of chaos, threatening to further stretch hospital workers already struggling with a surge of delta cases and upend holiday plans for the second year in a row. The White House on Wednesday insisted there is no need for a lockdown because vaccines are widely available and appear to offer protection against the worst consequences of the virus. But even if omicron proves milder on the whole than delta, it may disarm some of the life-saving tools available and put immune-compromised and elderly people at particular risk as it begins a rapid assault on the United States. "Our delta surge is ongoing and, in fact, accelerating. And on top of that, we're going to add an omicron surge," said Dr. Jacob Lemieux, who monitors variants for a research collaboration led by Harvard Medical School.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-lifestyle-health-business-383358fab484d2422aa4234c2221ba7>

Germany scrambles to buy millions of coronavirus vaccine doses

Health Minister Karl Lauterbach and Finance Minister Christian Lindner on Wednesday announced that Germany is prepared to shell out an extra €2.2 billion (\$2.48 billion) of its budget to secure 92 million doses of coronavirus vaccines as the omicron variant spreads and Germany's new government sounds the alarm over dangerously depleted vaccine stocks. The order will see Berlin purchase 80 million doses of the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine through EU programs and another 12 million doses on the open market. Lauterbach said, "We need more vaccines quickly for speedy booster shots and possible omicron vaccinations."

<https://www.dw.com/en/germany-scrambles-to-buy-millions-of-coronavirus-vaccine-doses/a-60138114>

Norway faces Omicron 'contagion bomb' with up to 300,000 infected daily, health chiefs warn while strain is set to become most dominant in Denmark in days as Europe faces new ...

The Norwegian Institute of Public Health said restrictions must be imposed on up to 300,000 people

will be infected with Covid every day. Norway's PM set to announce the country will further tighten Covid restrictions. Denmark is second worldwide only to the UK in confirmed cases of Omicron, with the Nordic country reporting a total of 3,437 cases since variant emerged. France set to be hit by a sixth Covid wave in January due to the Omicron variant.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10304779/Norway-faces-Omicron-contagion-bomb-300-000-cases-daily-Europe-faces-Covid-onslaught.html>

U.K. Faces Inevitable Surge in Hospital Cases From Omicron

The “phenomenal pace” at which the new Covid-19 omicron strain is spreading across the U.K. will trigger a surge in hospital admissions over the holiday period, according to Boris Johnson’s top medical adviser. “Substantial numbers” of people will be hospitalized and that will “become apparent soon after Christmas, Chris Whitty, chief medical officer for England, said at a televised press conference alongside the prime minister Wednesday. That is a “reasonably nailed on prospect,” he added, using a Britishism to refer to an outcome being certain. The stark assessment of the threat posed by omicron, on the day the U.K. reported a record number of new coronavirus cases, will raise further questions about the steps taken by Johnson’s government to tackle the variant and whether the National Health Service can withstand the surge in infections.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-15/u-k-faces-inevitable-surge-in-hospital-admissions-from-omicron>

Whitty calls for caution over promising hospital data in South Africa

Professor Chris Whitty today called for 'serious caution' over a raft of promising data which suggests Omicron may cause milder disease. Fewer Covid-infected patients are being admitted to hospital wards in South Africa now compared to previous waves, sparking hopes that the strain is less lethal than the rivals it has outcompeted. But England's chief medical officer told a Downing Street press briefing that the figures were to be expected, simply because the country had higher levels of immunity going into the wave than during the summer, when Delta struck. Professor Whitty warned the same pattern may not be replicated in the UK because it wasn't hit as badly by the variant it took over from, warning that South Africa's most recent wave was more recent so its population-wide immunity was fresher.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/omicron-variant/article-10314001/Chris-Whitty-calls-caution-promising-Covid-hospitalisation-data-South-Africa.html>

Omicron is responsible for 60% of COVID cases in London - minister

Britain's health minister Sajid Javid said on Wednesday that the Omicron variant of the coronavirus was now responsible for about 60% of cases of COVID-19 in London. "No one wants to see any more restrictions," Javid told BBC television when asked if the government planned to tighten its rules to slow the spread. "At the same time, people want to be safe, for themselves, for their family for their friends." The United Kingdom recorded its highest daily coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic earlier on Wednesday.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/omicron-is-responsible-60-covid-cases-london-minister-2021-12-15/>

Australia re-opens borders to non-citizens despite Omicron worries

Australia on Wednesday reopened borders to vaccinated skilled migrants and foreign students after a nearly two-year ban on their entry, in a bid to boost an economy hit by stop-start COVID-19 lockdowns. The emergence of the new Omicron variant forced officials to delay the reopening of international travel by two weeks after health officials sought a pause to get more information about the strain, which appears to show milder symptoms than other coronavirus variants. "I just met my mum for the first time in four years, I'm so happy and thankful borders have opened," Kang Jin, a traveller from South Korea, told reporters in Sydney.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-reopens-borders-non-citizens-despite-omicron-worries-2021-12-1>

Exit Strategies

Scale back Christmas plans, England's chief medical officer warns public

England's chief medical officer warned people not to mix with others unless they have to in the run-up to Christmas after Britain recorded its most daily coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic. With a new highly transmissible Omicron variant of the virus surging across Britain, a further 78,610 COVID-19 infections were reported on Wednesday, about 10,000 more than the previous high reported in January. Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said that Britain is being hit by "two epidemics on top of each other" as he urged the public to scale back their Christmas plans. "People should be prioritising those things, and only those things, that really matter to them," he told a news conference. "Don't mix with people you don't have to."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-reports-record-daily-covid-cases-with-omicron-spreading-rapidly-2021-12-15/>

Facing new COVID wave, staff at a French hospital say: 'We're exhausted'

Doctor Ruxandra Divan, an intensive care anaesthetist in eastern France, slumped down onto her haunches against a wall of her department, exhausted by the prospect of tackling a new COVID-19 wave with a depleted staff. "It's the tiredness," said Divan on Wednesday, mid-way through her shift at the Colmar Hospital, near France's border with Germany and Switzerland. "People are fed up of dealing with patients who aren't vaccinated. We are really tired." Healthcare systems across Europe are facing up to more COVID-19 admissions, with infection rates accelerating, and the added uncertainty of how the new Omicron variant will affect public health.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/facing-new-covid-wave-staff-french-hospital-say-were-exhausted-2021-12-15/>

India's Poonawalla family donate £50m for Oxford vaccine centre

The family of the Indian billionaire and self-proclaimed "prince of vaccines" Adar Poonawalla are donating £50m to Oxford University for the construction of a new research centre that will house the team who developed the AstraZeneca-Oxford Covid-19 vaccine. The Poonawalla family, who own and run the world's largest vaccine producer, Serum Institute of India (SII), announced on Wednesday that they had agreed to give the university the sum to build a new home for the Jenner Institute. The new centre on the university's Old Road campus will be named the Poonawalla Vaccines Research building.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/15/india-poonawalla-family-donate-oxford-vaccine-centre-serum-institute>

Covid vaccinations: 'We desperately need volunteers'

With the government announcing all over-18s are to be offered their booster jabs by the end of the year, vaccination centres are in dire need of more volunteers. The BBC spoke to some of those helping out at one centre in Essex. At the vaccination centre at Maldon District Council's offices, volunteers are helping marshal queues and vaccinate the thousands of people who turn up every week. Across Mid and South Essex, 7,500 jabs are administered every day - but that that needs to reach 22,000 by the end of December if every person eligible for a booster vaccine comes forward.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-59655362>

Covid jabs for younger children in UK could get green light before Christmas

The UK government's vaccines watchdog is hopeful of approving Covid jabs for younger children before Christmas, with officials saying the wait to do this has been caused in part by a delay in the manufacturer seeking regulatory approval. Before Covid vaccines can be used for five- to 11-year-olds, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) must give a specific vaccine the green light. So far only Pfizer has applied for its vaccine to be used for this age group. After that, the vaccines watchdog, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), would meet to

discuss whether the vaccination programme should be expanded to include younger children.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/14/covid-jabs-for-younger-children-in-uk-could-get-green-light-before-christmas>

NHS and social care workers must have Covid vaccine after MPs pass new law

Care staff and NHS workers will now be required to have their coronavirus vaccine in order to work after MPs voted through a new law this evening (Tuesday, December 14). MPs voted 385 to 100 in favour of the new regulations, which will require NHS and social care staff to be vaccinated by April 2022. It means those who have not received their vaccine have just a few months to get it or face being unable to work. While the new regulation was approved in Parliament, it did meet resistance from some MPs, including dozens from the Conservative party.

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/uk-news/nhs-social-worker-mandatory-vaccine-22463685>

COVID-19: Boris Johnson over-reacting to Omicron and creating 'hysteria', South African doctor Dr Angelique Coetzee says

Dr Angelique Coetzee is asked how many patients infected with Omicron she has seen with the most severe symptoms. "No one," she replies. Apart, that is, from a man with HIV who had pneumonia and comorbidities. "I haven't seen any COVID-19 pneumonia and neither have my colleagues," she adds. A couple of patients she saw before her interview with Sky News were showing mild symptoms. "They're happy, they're going on holiday," she says with something resembling a shrug. Boris Johnson is creating "hysteria", the GP who also heads South Africa's Medical Association says, adding that the UK is much better vaccinated than her country.

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-boris-johnson-over-reacting-to-omicron-and-creating-hysteria-south-african-doctor-dr-angelique-coetzee-says-12495876>

Japan government panel clears Moderna COVID vaccine for booster shots

Japan's health ministry said on Wednesday its panel of experts had agreed Moderna Inc's COVID-19 vaccines could be used for booster shots, setting the stage for official government approval. Japan started administering booster shots this month with Pfizer Inc vaccines. The panel agreed Moderna vaccines could be used on those aged 18 or older for booster shots, the ministry said. The same age restriction is being applied to Pfizer vaccines for booster shots.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-government-panel-clears-moderna-covid-vaccine-booster-shots-2021-12-15/>

Italy extends COVID-19 state of emergency, imposes swab for EU visitors

Italy on Tuesday extended a COVID-19 state of emergency to March 31 and ruled that all visitors from EU countries must take a test before departure, amid concerns over the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. The state of emergency, which was introduced in January last year, gives greater powers to the central government, making it easier for officials to bypass the bureaucracy that smothers much decision-making in Italy.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italy-extends-covid-19-state-emergency-end-march-2021-12-14/>

Germany to ease testing for those with COVID-19 booster

Germany will exempt people who have had a booster vaccination from having to take a coronavirus test before entering some leisure facilities, federal and regional health ministers agreed on Tuesday. The proposal, agreed by Health Minister Karl Lauterbach and ministers from Germany's 16 federal states, is aimed at encouraging people to get a booster shot and relieving testing capacity. However, a negative test result would still be required to enter hospitals and care homes to help protect more vulnerable people, according to the draft, reviewed by Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-plans-ease-testing-those-with-covid-19-booster-draft-2021-12-14/>

London nightclub owners pan UK's new COVID-19 rules for venues

Nightclub owners in London criticised new restrictions to halt the spread of coronavirus variants that will go into effect on Wednesday, saying that a lack of rapid COVID-19 tests will make enforcement a "big challenge". Last week, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the new "Plan B" measures to tackle the spread of the Omicron variant, including the use of COVID-19 vaccine passes to enter some venues such as nightclubs and settings with larger crowds. Negative rapid tests, known as lateral flow tests, will also be accepted. Britain has registered almost 4,500 cases of Omicron, with 10 people hospitalised and one person dying after contracting the variant.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/london-nightclub-owners-pan-uks-new-covid-19-rules-venues-2021-12-15/>

Vaccine alliance chief: Omicron could trigger 'Inequity 2.0'

The head of vaccine alliance Gavi, which is leading a U.N.-backed push to get COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries, said that he's seen early signs that rich countries are beginning to withhold donations out of fears about the omicron coronavirus variant — warning any new hoarding could lead to "Inequity 2.0." Gavi chief executive Dr. Seth Berkley took stock of the nearly two-year fight against the pandemic as the alliance released the latest update to its supply forecast for COVID-19 vaccines that it has repeatedly downscaled, largely because of export bans and vaccine hoarding by some producer countries that critics say it should have foreseen. "With the omicron variant, what we've seen is panic in many countries that has led acceleration of boosters both to the numbers of people getting them, but also the timeline for getting them," Berkley told The Associated Press in an interview late Tuesday at his home outside Geneva.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-pandemics-7640f940192fc5e787d03fc402773691>

Google to employees: get the job or get fired

Alphabet Inc's Google told its employees they would lose pay and eventually be fired if they do not follow its COVID-19 vaccination rules, CNBC has reported, citing internal documents. A memo circulated by Google's leadership said employees had until December 3 to declare their vaccination status and upload documentation showing proof, or to apply for a medical or religious exemption, according to the report.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/12/15/google-to-employees-get-the-job-or-get-fired>

Partisan Exits

Kremlin's hand seen in eastern Europe's hostility to Covid vaccine

Adrian Onciu had a tough time finding somewhere to publish his coronavirus vaccine stories. The Romanian journalist's reports alleged nefarious ties between European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and the Covid vaccine maker Pfizer, as well as schemes by American firms and officials to manipulate media on behalf of the pharmaceutical industry. His pieces were rejected by just about every news outlet in Romania, including one website that recently featured an article about chewing gums that ward off Covid. But Mr Onciu, who conceded in an interview he had no documentary evidence to substantiate his claims, eventually found a platform that would not only publish his work but prominently promote it as a multi-part series on its website: Russia's state-owned Sputnik news service, which is seen as a propaganda tool of the Kremlin.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/covid-vaccine-eastern-europe-conspiracies-b1975663.html>

SQREEM's New AI-powered Study Examines Motivations Surrounding COVID-19 Vaccine Resistance in the US

Leveraging proprietary Artificial Intelligence (AI) built to understand online human behavior in a completely anonymous way, SQREEM Technologies' recent U.S. COVID-19 Vaccine Study provides a striking insight into the attitudes and motivations of anti-vaxxers and the vaccine-hesitant. The study utilizes anonymized digital engagement scores as the main metric to understand audience relevance to topics/aspects surrounding COVID-19 vaccination. In the study, 'anti-vaxxers' are audiences that do not agree with the COVID-19 vaccine and its use, while 'vaccine-hesitant' are

audiences that are reluctant to use the COVID-19 vaccine despite its availability. For both groups, digital engagement scores with values greater than 5 signify awareness, while values greater than 10 signify a strong engagement with the topic.

<https://apnews.com/press-release/pr-newswire/coronavirus-pandemic-joe-biden-technology-health-business-103f6f22f5e83ddd2898870d1897f9e9>

How a Kennedy built an anti-vaccine juggernaut amid COVID-19

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. strode onto the stage at a Southern California church, radiating Kennedy confidence and surveying the standing ovation crowd with his piercing blue Bobby Kennedy eyes. Then, he launched into an anti-vaccine rant. Democrats “drank the Kool-Aid,” he told people assembled for a far right conference, branded as standing for “health and freedom.” “It is criminal medical malpractice to give a child one of these vaccines,” Kennedy contended, according to a video of the event, one of his many assertions that ignored or went against legal, scientific and public health consensus. Then, Kennedy hawked his book. If just 300 attendees preordered it on Amazon that night, he told the crowd, it would land on the bestseller list and they could “stick it to Amazon and Jeff Bezos.”

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/fda-covid-facebook-providence-indiana-university-b1976343.html>

"Shameful": Auschwitz-style banner at Polish COVID vaccine protest condemned

The Auschwitz Museum and Poland's prime minister on Wednesday condemned anti-COVID vaccination protesters as "shameful" and "mindless" for displaying a banner that mimicked the infamous sign at the gates of the Nazi concentration camp. The banner featured the words "Vaccination makes you free" on an arch shaped to echo the one that reads "Work makes you free" outside Auschwitz. It appeared at a demonstration in Warsaw on Tuesday organised by deputies of the far-right Confederation party against what it says is Poland's programme of forced vaccinations.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/shameful-auschwitz-style-banner-polish-covid-vaccine-protest-condemned-2021-12-15/>

After stinging revolt, UK PM Johnson defends COVID record

Britain's prime minister defended his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic on Wednesday, saying new restrictions were needed to fight a new variant as the number of daily infections in the United Kingdom soared to a record high. Boris Johnson's government sought to play down what was the largest parliamentary vote against his administration by lawmakers from his own party a day earlier, with one minister saying it was not surprising that there were different views over the restrictions, dubbed draconian by many Conservatives.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-minister-says-governing-is-hard-after-parliamentary-revolt-2021-12-15/>

We'll all be dead before FDA releases full COVID vaccine record, plaintiffs say

In advance of a court hearing before a federal judge in Fort Worth, Texas, Tuesday, the Food and Drug Administration has offered by the end of January to make public 12,000 pages of data that it relied on to license Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine. At first glance, that sounds like a lot of material. Except a group of scientists and doctors who've sued the agency under the Freedom of Information Act is seeking an estimated 400,000-plus additional pages of information about the vaccine's approval. Under the FDA's proposed schedule - the agency pledges to release "a minimum" of 500 pages a month after the initial dump - the full trove might not be made public until the year 2097.

<https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/well-all-be-dead-before-fda-releases-full-covid-vaccine-record-plaintiffs-say-2021-12-13/>

German police foil 'anti-vaxxer murder plot' against state premier

German police have foiled a plot by anti-vaccination activists to murder the state premier of Saxony in eastern Germany, they said on Wednesday, as concerns grow over an increasingly violent

pushback against COVID-19 vaccination plans. The plot to kill Michael Kretschmer is the latest in a series of incidents that underscore the anger of some Germans over restrictions on the unvaccinated and plans to make vaccinations compulsory for the general population. Saxony has one of Germany's highest levels of COVID-19 infection but also its lowest vaccination rate. It is a stronghold of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which harbours many vaccine sceptics and anti-lockdown protesters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/german-police-conduct-raids-saxony-over-anti-vaxxer-murder-plot-2021-12-15/>

Continued Lockdown

Dutch COVID-19 restrictions extended through Christmas holidays

The Netherlands will extend COVID-19 restrictions through the Christmas holidays, including the early closure of schools, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said on Tuesday. The rapid spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which is making up roughly 1% of new infections in the country, "is a reason to be concerned and to be cautious," Rutte said in a televised comments. Elementary schools will close a week early to try to prevent children from infecting older family members during Christmas as hospitals struggle with a wave of COVID-19 patients.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/dutch-consider-early-christmas-break-schools-limit-covid-19-spread-2021-12-14/>

Scientific Viewpoint

Sanofi, GSK say COVID-19 vaccine booster candidate give good immune response

Sanofi and GlaxoSmithKline said on Wednesday a single booster dose of their COVID-19 vaccine candidate provided strong immune responses, preliminary data from clinical trials show, a boost for the drugmakers after lagging the vaccine race.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/sanofi-gsk-announce-positive-booster-data-their-covid-19-vaccine-candidate-2021-12-15/>

The Hunt for a One-Shot Coronavirus Vaccine

Wang's lab is one of several racing to develop such a shot. Others include researchers at Duke University, the California Institute of Technology and Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. The research is still in its early days, and scientists have yet to figure out which parts of the virus to target, what technology works best and how broad-acting the shot could be. But in the long term, the biggest question may be not the science but who is going to fund large trials and manufacturing scale-up if the pan-coronavirus results continue to remain promising. Many existing Covid-19 vaccine companies haven't invested heavily in the pan-coronavirus work, as they wait for the research to mature. Until they decide to invest more significantly, large dollops of government and nonprofit funding will be required to move it forward, and it isn't yet clear where all the money would come from.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2021-12-15/the-hunt-for-a-one-shot-coronavirus-vaccine>

Vaccines still provide 'significant protection' against severe COVID-19

Omicron has been the latest variant to test the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. COVID-19 vaccines appear to have become less effective in preventing severe COVID-19 disease and death, but they still provide 'significant protection', says the World Health Organisation (WHO), according to Reuters. The Omicron variant, first detected in South Africa and Hong Kong last month, has now been reported by 77 countries. WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasised that it should not be dismissed as "mild".

https://www.pharmatimes.com/news/vaccines_still_provide_significant_protection_against_severe_covid-19_1385281

U.S. study suggests vaccines may be ineffective against Omicron without booster

All three U.S.-authorized COVID-19 vaccines appear to be significantly less protective against the

newly-detected Omicron variant of the coronavirus in laboratory testing, but a booster dose likely restores most of the protection, according to a study released on Tuesday. The study from researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard and MIT that has not yet been peer reviewed tested blood from people who received the Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines against a pseudovirus engineered to resemble the Omicron variant.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-study-suggests-covid-19-vaccines-may-be-ineffective-against-omicron-without-2021-12-14/>

Hong Kong researchers urge third COVID-19 shot after new Omicron study

Researchers in Hong Kong have urged people to get a third dose of COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible, after a study showed insufficient antibodies were generated by the Sinovac and BioNTech products to fend off Omicron. Tuesday's release of the results of a study by scientists in the microbiology department of the University of Hong Kong was the first published preliminary data on the impact of Sinovac's vaccine against the Omicron variant of coronavirus. None of the serum of the 25 Coronavac vaccine recipients contained sufficient antibodies to neutralise the new variant, according to the study, accepted for publication in the journal Clinical Infectious Diseases, the researchers said.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/hong-kong-researchers-urge-third-covid-19-shot-after-new-omicron-study-2021-12-15/>

EU regulator backs J&J COVID-19 booster dose for adults

The European Union's drug regulator on Wednesday recommended that a booster dose of Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 shot may be given at least two months after a first dose in people aged 18 years and older, as the bloc battles surging infections. The Omicron coronavirus variant is swiftly spreading across the globe, with many new cases linked to the mutant and the World Health Organization warning that Omicron poses a "very high" risk but data on its severity is limited. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) said its recommendation to allow J&J booster doses follows data which showed the additional shot led to a rise in antibodies against the COVID-causing SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-regulator-backs-jj-covid-19-booster-dose-adults-2021-12-15/>

Pfizer set to oust AstraZeneca as top supplier of COVID-19 shots to poor nations

Pfizer and BioNtech are set to displace AstraZeneca as the main suppliers of COVID-19 vaccines to the global COVAX programme at the start of 2022, a shift that shows the increasing importance of their shot for poorer states. The expected change comes with headaches for receiving countries that lack sufficient cold storage capacity to handle the Pfizer vaccine, and amid risks of a shortage of syringes needed to administer that shot. AstraZeneca is currently the most distributed vaccine by COVAX, according to data from Gavi, the vaccine alliance that co-manages the programme with the World Health Organization (WHO).

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/pfizer-set-oust-astrazeneca-top-supplier-covid-19-shots-poor-nations-2021-12-15/>

Sanofi, GSK delay data on COVID-19 vaccine booster candidate until 2022

Sanofi and GlaxoSmithKline said on Wednesday they expect data from late-stage clinical trials of its booster dose of their COVID-19 vaccine candidate in the first quarter, instead of this year, another delay for the potential shot. The news came as the French and British partners said preliminary data from trials showed the single-dose booster provided strong immune responses. The companies said they need more time to test the booster on more people who have not been infected by the virus before they can submit data to regulators. The Phase III trial for the recombinant adjuvanted COVID-19 vaccine recruited most participants in the third quarter, coinciding with a significant increase in the number of people infected globally due to the Delta variant, it said. "To provide the

necessary data to regulatory authorities for the booster vaccine submission, the trial will continue to accrue the number of events needed for analysis, with results expected in Q1, 2022."

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/sanofi-gsk-announce-positive-booster-data-their-covid-19-vaccine-candidate-2021-12-15/>

COVID-19 vaccines may be less effective against Omicron - WHO

Preliminary evidence indicates that COVID-19 vaccines may be less effective against infection and transmission linked to the Omicron coronavirus variant, which also carries a higher risk of reinfection, the World Health Organization said on Wednesday. The WHO, in its weekly epidemiological update, said that more data was needed to better understand the extent to which Omicron may evade immunity derived from either vaccines or previous infection.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/covid-19-vaccines-may-be-less-effective-against-omicron-who-2021-12-15/>

Will we always need Covid-19 boosters? Experts have theories

With the world facing the latest in a seemingly endless stream of coronavirus variants — and with bullish talk from manufacturers about a need for even more vaccine shots — you wouldn't be alone if you were wondering: Are Covid boosters always going to be a fixture in our future? The simple truth is that, at this point, there's no definitive answer to that question. But virologists, immunologists, and vaccinologists have opinions that are anchored in an understanding of how the immune system works and in emerging data on how Covid vaccines engage with this complicated enterprise that has evolved to help humans fend off disease threats.

<https://www.statnews.com/2021/12/15/will-we-always-need-covid-19-boosters-experts-have-theories/>

Coronavirus Resurgence

COVID-19: Omicron overtakes Delta as dominant coronavirus variant in London as cases surge across UK

Omicron has now overtaken Delta as the dominant variant in London - and other regions are just a few days behind on the growth curve, new data suggests. The figures, released by the UK Health Security Agency, reveal Omicron hotspots across England, with the East, South East and North West also having high rates. The data also shows five people are in hospital suspected of being infected with the Omicron strain, in addition to the 10 confirmed cases already reported by the UKHSA.

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-omicron-overtakes-delta-as-dominant-coronavirus-variant-in-london-as-cases-surge-across-uk-12496452>

Africa sees 83% surge in COVID-19 cases in past week

Africa is experiencing its fastest surge in COVID-19 cases this year, with the number up 83% in the past week, although deaths remain low, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday. The spike in cases is driven by the Delta and Omicron variants, the WHO said in a statement. The number of new COVID-19 cases on the continent is currently doubling every five days, the shortest time frame reported this year. Africa's low inoculation rates have encouraged viral mutations like the new Omicron variant to spread, according to health experts. The continent struggled to obtain vaccine doses until recently, and is facing challenges to distribute them including lack of funds, staff and equipment. As of Monday, only 20 African countries had vaccinated at least 10% of their population, according to the WHO. Some countries, like Democratic Republic of Congo and Chad, have vaccinated less than 1%, data collected by Reuters shows.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/15/africa-sees-83-surge-in-covid-19-cases-in-past-week/>

Cambodia detects first case of Omicron coronavirus variant

Cambodia has detected the country's first case of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus in a local woman who had travelled from Ghana, the ministry of health said. The 23-year old woman had

returned from Ghana via Dubai and Bangkok, the ministry said in a statement issued on Tuesday. The woman, who was 15 weeks pregnant, had been admitted to hospital for treatment, it said. The Omicron variant first detected in South Africa and Hong Kong last month has now been reported by over 70 countries and is probably present in most worldwide, but should not be dismissed as "mild", the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodia-detects-first-case-omicron-coronavirus-variant-2021-12-15/>

Philippines detects first 2 cases of Omicron coronavirus variant

The Philippines has detected two imported cases of the Omicron coronavirus variant of concern, its first reported cases, the Department of Health said on Wednesday. The two Omicron variant cases, detected from 48 samples sequenced on Dec. 14, were currently isolated in a quarantine facility, it said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-detects-first-2-cases-omicron-coronavirus-variant-2021-12-15/>

S.Korea considers tightening COVID-19 rules as new cases climb to daily record

South Korea warned on Wednesday it may reinstate stricter social distancing curbs as it posted a new record daily coronavirus tally due to a persistent spike in breakthrough infections among those vaccinated and serious cases. The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) posted 7,850 cases for Tuesday, with the number of patients in serious condition also reaching a fresh high at 964. Daily tallies of infections shot past 7,000 for the first time last week, just days after passing the 5,000 mark, putting ever greater strains on the country's medical capacity

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skorea-reports-7850-new-covid-19-cases-highest-daily-total-kdca-2021-12-15/>

Omicron estimated to be 2.9% of COVID-19 variants in U.S.-CDC

The Omicron variant was estimated to be 2.9% of the COVID-19 variants circulating in the United States as of Dec. 11, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For the week ended Dec. 4, Omicron constituted 0.4% of all variants in the country, based on the specimens sequenced. The agency also estimated that the fast-spreading variant, first detected in South Africa, Botswana and Hong Kong in late November, was 13.1% of circulating COVID-19 variants in New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands for the week ended Dec. 11.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/omicron-estimated-be-29-covid-19-variants-us-cdc-2021-12-14/>

Rwanda and Kenya confirm cases of Omicron coronavirus variant

Rwanda and Kenya have confirmed their first cases of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, authorities in both countries said, as the heavily mutated strain continues to spread on the continent where it was first detected. On Tuesday Rwanda's health ministry said the small central African country had detected six cases as it pushed for people to get vaccinated. "All arriving passengers must quarantine for three days at a designated hotel at their own cost," the cabinet of ministers said in a resolution on Tuesday, adding that it had suspended night club operations and live band entertainment.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/rwanda-confirms-six-infections-with-omicron-variant-2021-12-15/>

Poland's daily COVID death toll hits fourth wave record

Poland's daily death toll from COVID-19 during the fourth wave of the pandemic has climbed to a record 669, the health ministry said on Wednesday, as the country battles high infection rates with tighter restrictions. "This is the effect of these last weeks, when the number of cases has accumulated. They are mainly unvaccinated people," government spokesman Piotr Muller told private broadcaster Radio Zet earlier.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/polands-daily-covid-death-toll-hits-fourth-wave-record-govt-spokesman-2021-12-15/>

UK records 59610 new COVID cases, highest since January

Britain reported 59,610 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, the highest figure since early January, as it faces what Prime Minister Boris Johnson has called a "tidal wave" on infections from the Omicron variant, official data showed. The number of new infections is the fifth highest recorded since the outbreak of the pandemic in March last year. The figures also showed there had been 150 deaths within 28 days of a positive test.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/uk-records-59610-new-covid-cases-highest-since-january-2021-12-14/>

EU official: Omicron to be dominant variant by mid-January

Omicron is expected to be the dominant coronavirus variant in the European Union's 27 nations by mid-January, the bloc's top official said Wednesday amid concerns that a dramatic rise in infections will leave Europe shrouded in gloom during the holiday season. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the EU is well prepared to fight omicron with 66.6% of its population fully vaccinated. She expressed disappointment that the pandemic will again disrupt year-end celebrations but said she was confident the EU has the "strength" and "means" to overcome COVID-19. "Like many of you, I'm sad that once again this Christmas will be overshadowed by the pandemic," she said.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-executive-branch-8bb518aaf1e15f6516e15f649cccd19>