

# COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

## 17th Dec 2021

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### Lockdown Exit

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#### **COVID SCIENCE-Omicron thrives in airways, not lungs; new data on asymptomatic cases**

The following is a summary of some recent studies on COVID-19. They include research that warrants further study to corroborate the findings and that has yet to be certified by peer review. Omicron multiplies faster in airways, slower in lungs Major differences in how efficiently Omicron and other variants of the coronavirus multiply may help predict Omicron's effects, researchers said on Wednesday. Compared to the earlier Delta variant, Omicron multiplies itself 70 times more quickly in tissues that line airway passages, which may facilitate person-to-person spread, they said. But in lung tissues, Omicron replicates 10 times more slowly than the original version of the coronavirus, which might contribute to less-severe illness.

<https://ca.news.yahoo.com/covid-science-omicron-thrives-airways-214531786.html>

#### **CDC Advisers Back Use of Pfizer, Moderna Covid Shots Over J&J's**

Messenger RNA vaccines made by Moderna Inc. and Pfizer Inc. are preferable for use in adults over Johnson & Johnson's, U.S. public health advisers said. All 15 members of an outside panel of experts to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention voted to make the recommendation on J&J's vaccine. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices met Thursday after U.S. regulators announced revisions to the shot's fact sheet to warn of a rare clotting syndrome linked to the shot. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky still must sign off on the recommendation before any changes to vaccinations can be implemented.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/cdc-advisers-back-use-of-pfizer-moderna-covid-shots-over-j-26j-e2-80-99s/ar-AARTiA5>

#### **Sweden extends COVID vaccination rules as hospitalisations rise**

Sweden will require visitors from other Nordic nations to have a vaccine pass to cross the border as it tightens restrictions in the face of rising number of COVID-19 infections and worries about the Omicron variant, the government said on Thursday. Sweden has seen new infections jump in recent days, if from levels below most European countries. It has reintroduced a limited number of measures and authorities said further steps would be needed if infections kept rising.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-extend-vaccine-pass-rules-nordic-travellers-2021-12-16/>

#### **Britain's hospital admissions could hit new high with Omicron - chief medic**

New cases of COVID-19 in Britain hit a record high for the second day running on Thursday, as England's Chief Medical Officer warned daily hospital admissions could also hit new peaks due to the fast-spreading Omicron coronavirus variant.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/some-british-hospitals-struggle-with-staff-shortages-due-covid-19-2021-12-16/>

#### **France halts British visitors, EU nations tighten borders as Omicron rises**

France imposed travel restrictions on travellers from Britain on Thursday due to surging COVID-19 cases there, and several European countries also strengthened border controls on visitors from other EU states. Plans for Christmas celebrations in Europe and many countries across the globe have been thrown into disarray by the rapid spread of the highly infectious Omicron variant, which emerged in Hong Kong and Southern Africa last month.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/france-halts-british-visitors-eu-nations-tighten-borders-omicron-rises-2021-12-16/>

## **France hardens travel curbs with Britain over Omicron concerns**

France announced on Thursday that because of surging COVID-19 cases in Britain only designated categories of people would be allowed to travel between the two countries, and anyone arriving from Britain would have to self-isolate. Truck drivers will though be exempt from the new rules, the French government said, easing British concerns the restrictions could cause supply chain disruptions. France said it was acting now because the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus, which scientists say appears to be highly infectious, is spreading rapidly in Britain.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-sees-number-covid-19-patients-icu-around-4000-by-christmas-holidays-2021-12-15/>

## **Exit Strategies**

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### **Covid-19 Cancels Christmas Around Europe...Again**

As Omicron variant spreads, mounting restrictions dash hopes of return to normal this festive season; France to place restrictions on tourists from U.K. From Spanish holidays to Greek celebrations to German circus performances, the Covid-19 pandemic has derailed plans and upended Christmas traditions across Europe for a second year in a row. After a surge in cases this fall dashed hopes of a normal festive season this year, authorities on the continent have tightened restrictions to avoid overwhelming hospitals. Expectations that the highly transmissible Omicron variant will soon take hold are further adding to the fears.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-cancels-christmas-around-europeagain-11639660145>

### **EU strikes deal with Moderna for quicker COVID-19 vaccine supplies**

The European Commission said on Thursday it has reached an agreement with Moderna to rush deliveries of the U.S. company's COVID-19 vaccine to Germany and other European Union member states, as cases surge due to the Omicron variant. Governments across Europe are struggling with soaring infections, with some regions imposing restrictions to curb the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-strikes-deal-with-moderna-quicker-covid-19-vaccine-supplies-2021-12-16/>

### **JCVI makes pregnant women priority group for Covid vaccination**

Pregnant women have been made a priority group for vaccination following research showing they are vulnerable to more serious illness and pregnancy complications if they are infected with Covid-19. The vaccines watchdog, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), announced on Thursday that pregnant women would be moved into priority group 6 alongside adults under the age of 65 who have long-term health conditions, and urged pregnant women to get first and second doses and booster jabs as soon as possible.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/16/jcvi-makes-pregnant-women-priority-group-for-covid-vaccination>

### **Army says nearly 98% got the COVID-19 vaccine by deadline**

Nearly 98% of the active duty Army had gotten at least one dose of the mandatory COVID-19 vaccine as of this week's deadline for the shots, but more than 3,800 soldiers flatly refused and could start being removed from the military next month, officials said Thursday. The U.S. military's largest service, however, reported the lowest number of service members seeking a religious exemption — a bit more than 1,700 soldiers — compared with the other three smaller services. In comparison, there are more than 4,700 in the Air Force 3,000 in the Marine Corps and 2,700 in the Navy who are requesting religious exemptions, according to data released by the services in the past week. None has yet been approved.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/air-force-army-washington-marine-corps-navy-b1977373.html?src=rss>

### **COVID-19: France to block British tourists amid rise in UK Omicron cases**

British tourists are to be banned from France amid concern over the "extremely rapid" rise in

Omicron COVID cases in the UK. From Saturday morning, France is barring travel to and from Britain without "compelling reasons". Those reasons do not include tourism and business, Paris said. It added that for those able to travel from the UK under a "compelling reason", there will be the obligation to register the address of their stay in France.

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-british-tourists-to-be-banned-from-france-amid-rise-in-omicron-cases-12497105>

### **Russian parliament backs draft law for COVID-19 immunity passes**

The Russian parliament's lower house, the State Duma, on Thursday gave the first nod of approval to a draft law that would require people to show QR codes demonstrating proof of immunity to COVID-19 in order to visit certain public places. The bill still needs to be approved by the upper house of parliament and signed by President Vladimir Putin to come into force. Earlier this week, the Russian parliament said it would shelve a draft bill that would have required people travelling by plane or train to present QR codes, after strong public opposition to the proposal

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-parliament-backs-draft-law-covid-19-immunity-passes-2021-12-16/>

### **Court revives health worker COVID-19 vaccine mandate in 26 U.S. states**

A federal appeals court on Wednesday revived in 26 U.S. states a COVID-19 mandate issued by President Joe Biden's administration requiring millions of healthcare workers to get vaccinated if they work in facilities that receive federal dollars. In a rare win for Biden's pandemic strategy, a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans ruled that a lower court had the authority to block the mandate in only the 14 states that had sued and was wrong to impose a nationwide injunction. The Biden administration mandate requires that healthcare facilities get staff vaccinated against the coronavirus or lose funding from the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, which administers the two large government healthcare programs.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/court-revives-us-covid-19-vaccine-mandate-healthcare-26-states-2021-12-15/>

### **Refugees lack COVID shots because drugmakers fear lawsuits - documents**

Tens of millions of migrants may be denied COVID-19 vaccines from a global programme because some major manufacturers are worried about legal risks from harmful side effects, according to officials and internal documents from Gavi, the charity operating the programme, reviewed by Reuters. Nearly two years into a pandemic that has already killed more than 5 million people, only about 7% of people in low-income countries have received a dose. Vaccine deliveries worldwide have been delayed by production problems, hoarding by rich countries, export restrictions and red tape. Many programmes have also been hampered by hesitancy among the public

<https://www.reuters.com/world/refugees-lack-covid-shots-because-drugmakers-fear-lawsuits-documents-2021-12-16/>

### **EU leaders struggle to find common ground on COVID travel rules**

Divisions within the European Union have deepened over travel rules to curb the spread of the Omicron variant of coronavirus, after Italy and Greece followed Portugal and Ireland in announcing additional curbs on travellers from other EU states. The EU's 27 member states have been debating for weeks how to coordinate travel policy, with the aim of containing the virus without disproportionately disrupting travel within the border-free European Schengen area.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-leaders-struggle-find-common-ground-covid-travel-rules-2021-12-16/>

### **South Africa to retain 'Level 1' curbs in Omicron fight**

South Africa's National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC) has retained its lockdown at 'adjusted level 1', or the lowest of a five-tier system of restrictions, in the battle on the Omicron variant, health authorities said on Thursday. In the past few days, South Africa has reported more than 20,000 new daily COVID-19 infections, but its scientists see no sign yet that the variant causes more severe illness. "The Council has directed the department to closely monitor the rising COVID-19 infections," the health department said in a statement, adding that it would also track hospital admissions, mortality and recovery rates.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-retain-level-1-curbs-omicron-fight-2021-12-16/>

### **SKorea bans gatherings of 5 or more people amid virus surge**

South Korea will prohibit private social gatherings of five or more people nationwide and force restaurants to close at 9 p.m., rolling out the country's toughest coronavirus restrictions yet as hospitals grapple with the deadliest month of the pandemic. Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum said Thursday that the new measures will be enforced for at least 16 days after taking effect on Saturday, saying there's an urgent need to bring the country to a "standstill" with the delta-driven surge overwhelming stretched hospitals and exhausted medical workers. Schools in the densely populated capital Seoul and nearby metropolitan areas, where the virus has hit hardest, will also go back to remote learning after fully reopening in November.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-seoul-south-korea-f61ffef4536960b72aab6fa1814ccf3>

### **Millions of unjabbed a key concern as England scrambles to vaccinate**

In the Newtown ward of central Birmingham, the government's "Get boosted now" slogan means nothing to half of over-16s, because they have not had any vaccination against Covid at all. It is a similar story in Westminster and Camden in London where among the over-12s, 30% have not had a single jab. In Nottingham, a quarter of the whole population face the coming Omicron "tidal wave" unvaccinated. The vaccination scramble is not just about boosters but about persuading millions to get any jab at all. "Omicron will unevenly hit the least protected," said Jim McManus, the president of the Association of Directors of Public Health. "We have two jobs: to get the vaccines into as many arms as possible and really get into the communities with the worst uptake."

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/15/millions-of-unjabbed-a-key-concern-as-england-scrambles-to-vaccinate>

## **Partisan Exits**

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### **Thousands protest COVID-19 rules as New Zealand marks 90% vaccine rates**

Thousands marched in New Zealand's capital Wellington on Thursday to protest against COVID-19 vaccine mandates and lockdowns, as the country reached the 90% fully vaccinated milestone. New Zealand's tough lockdown and vaccination drives have helped keep coronavirus infections and related deaths low, but it has also drawn criticism from some calling for more freedoms and an end to mandatory vaccine requirements. The government has mandated vaccinations for teachers, workers in the health and disability sectors, police and other public service sectors.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thousands-protest-covid-19-rules-new-zealand-marks-90-vaccine-rates-2021-12-16/>

### **Vaccine skeptics in Eastern Europe having change of heart**

Some former vaccine skeptics in Eastern Europe have shifted over to the other side as coronavirus infections surge, countries are making it more difficult for the unvaccinated to travel abroad and authorities battle against government distrust and vaccine disinformation. When she rolled up her sleeve in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo to take her first COVID-19 vaccine dose, Fata Keco was afraid of possible adverse side effects. But she said the worst she had to contend with over the next few days was "moderately discomforting pain" in her left arm around the site of the injection. More significantly, the 52-year-old self-employed cleaning woman has joined the global community of vaccine-believers after months of "being very susceptible" to what she now describes as "the most ridiculous theories."

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-business-sarajevo-pandemics-701c36d69d1884711eb9040b91303c3c>

## **Scientific Viewpoint**

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### **EU Strikes Deal With Moderna to Speed German Vaccine Supply**

The European Union brokered a deal to expedite deliveries of the Moderna Covid-19 vaccine to countries like Germany that are experiencing temporary shortages as they try to accelerate inoculation and ward off the omicron variant. Moderna Inc. agreed to bring forward delivery of 10 million doses to Germany in December, enough for 20 million boosters, the European Commission said Thursday. The company will also provide 25 million extra shots to Germany in the first quarter of 2022. Germany has started rationing Covid vaccines through the rest of the year as it seeks to maintain momentum in its ramped-up booster campaign going despite an unexpected shortage of BioNTech SE vaccines.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-16/eu-strikes-deal-with-moderna-to-speed-vaccine-doses-to-germany>

### **Denmark approves treatment with Merck's COVID-19 tablet molnupiravir**

Danish health authorities on Thursday approved treatment with Merck & Co Inc's molnupiravir tablet for COVID-19 patients at risk of serious illness, including the elderly. The medication has yet to be approved by the European Medical Agency, which in late November started reviewing U.S. drugmaker Merck's experimental COVID-19 antiviral pill for adults and said it could issue an opinion within weeks.

<https://kfgo.com/2021/12/16/denmark-approves-treatment-with-mercks-covid-19-tablet-molnupiravir/>

### **Pfizer says its COVID pill will protect against severe disease, even from Omicron**

Scientists are working to learn more about a new COVID-19 variant, Omicron, that was first detected in South Africa, setting out to discover how transmissible it is, whether the vaccines that are currently available are effective against it, and other answers as much is still unknown about the strain. In order to shore up protection against the virus amid data that show immunity wanes from the vaccines over time, US health officials have expanded their recommendations for who should get COVID-19 booster shots to include people 16 and older. The expansion comes as COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations rise in Massachusetts, in what experts fear is the start of a winter surge.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/pfizer-offers-70-percent-protection-against-omicron-hospitalizations-in-south-africa-study/ar-AAODtSq>

### **GSK/Sanofi Covid booster delayed by lack of uninfected people to test it on**

Efforts by the British and French drugmakers GSK and Sanofi Pasteur to produce a Covid-19 vaccine have suffered a further setback, with final clinical data on the jab and a potential launch delayed until next year as they struggle to find enough uninfected people to test it on. The two vaccine specialists announced positive preliminary results from a trial that showed the vaccine raised antibody levels against Covid by nine to 43 times when given as a single booster shot in people who had already received doses of AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, Moderna or Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines, for all age groups. There were no safety concerns, according to an independent review body. It is the most comprehensive booster trial to date, said GSK and Sanofi.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/15/gsk-sanofi-booster-delayed-by-lack-of-uninfected-people-to-test-it-on>

### **Covid 19: US cases rise amid omicron fears but booster shots offer protection, experts say**

Some 800 000 Americans have died from covid-19, the highest number of any country in the world, and cases, deaths, hospital admissions, and local transmission are increasing as the threat of omicron is growing, Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has said. However, two doses of an mRNA vaccine and a booster provide good protection and there is no need for a booster specific for the variant, said Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and President Joe Biden's medical advisor. Both spoke at a White House press briefing yesterday on 15 December.<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Zients, the White House

coronavirus response coordinator, said, "The US vaccination programme has already prevented 10.3 million hospital admissions. And it has saved 1.1 million American lives."

<https://www.bmj.com/content/375/bmj.n3098>

### **Covid-19 antiviral drug thapsigargin excites researchers in early tests with 'one of a kind' results**

A researcher at a British university believes he may have found a unique new antiviral drug that can stop the cause of Covid-19, could be made into a pill, tackles respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and influenza, and crucially would not encourage drug resistance. Prof Kin-Chow Chang of Nottingham University told i that early lab results for the antiviral, thapsigargin, have been so promising in the way it arms the body against the Sars-CoV-2 coronavirus that they almost appear "too good to be true" – showing it is "one of a kind". Prof Chang emphasises that his team's research, using cells and mice, is still at a preliminary stage. But further trials on animals are expected next year and his confidence is growing.

<https://inews.co.uk/news/science/covid-19-antiviral-drug-thapsigargin-researchers-early-tests-rsv-flu-results-1353702>

### **Takeda submits approval request for Novavax's COVID-19 vaccine in Japan**

Takeda Pharmaceutical Co Ltd has submitted an approval request for Novavax's COVID-19 vaccine to Japan's health ministry, the U.S. drugmaker said late on Wednesday.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/takeda-submits-approval-request-novavaxs-covid-19-vaccine-japan-2021-12-16/>

### **Japan approves Moderna COVID vaccine as booster, Novavax files for 1st approval**

Japan on Thursday officially approved Moderna Inc's COVID-19 vaccine for its booster programme, while Novavax Inc filed for first approval of its shot in the country. Moderna's mRNA-type vaccine, used mostly in Japan to date at workplace inoculation sites, was approved for used as a third booster shot for those aged 18 or older, following a recommendation from health ministry experts on Wednesday.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-adds-moderna-shot-covid-vaccine-booster-arsenal-joining-pfizer-2021-12-16/>

### **Omicron thrives in airways, not lungs; new data on asymptomatic cases**

The following is a summary of some recent studies on COVID-19. They include research that warrants further study to corroborate the findings and that has yet to be certified by peer review. Omicron multiplies faster in airways, slower in lungs Major differences in how efficiently Omicron and other variants of the coronavirus multiply may help predict Omicron's effects, researchers said on Wednesday. Compared to the earlier Delta variant, Omicron multiplies itself 70 times more quickly in tissues that line airway passages, which may facilitate person-to-person spread, they said. But in lung tissues, Omicron replicates 10 times more slowly than the original version of the coronavirus, which might contribute to less-severe illness.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-thrives-airways-not-lungs-new-data-asymptomatic-cases-2021-12-15/>

### **EU regulator okays COVID-19 treatments from GSK-Vir and Sobi**

The European Union's drug regulator on Thursday approved a COVID-19 treatment from British-U.S. duo GSK and Vir Biotechnology and another from Swedish drugmaker Sobi, as the bloc builds its defences against Omicron. The approval by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) of GSK-Vir's antibody drug Xevudy and Sobi's arthritis drug Kineret come as governments struggle with soaring infections and worry about the swiftly-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus. EMA's human medicines committee recommended using Kineret to treat COVID-19 in adults with pneumonia requiring oxygen support and those at risk of developing severe respiratory failure.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/eu-regulator-okays-covid-19-treatments-gsk-vir-sobi-2>

[021-12-16/](#)

### **Valneva says its booster works as a follow up to its own COVID-19 shot**

French biotech firm Valneva said on Thursday its COVID-19 vaccine candidate was efficient as a booster for people who had received the same shot as an initial vaccination. "Initial results confirm that VLA2001 significantly boosted immunity in participants who received VLA2001 as a primary vaccination," it said in a statement. The news comes almost two weeks after a British study showed VLA2001 was the only shot out of seven that offered no immunity boost when given to people previously immunised with Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/stocks/valneva-says-its-booster-works-follow-up-its-own-covid-19-shot-2021-12-16/>

### **Regeneron says its COVID-19 therapy has lower potency against Omicron**

AstraZeneca and Regeneron on Thursday reported contrasting data on the effectiveness of their COVID-19 antibody therapies against the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, underscoring the major challenges ahead for drugmakers. U.S.-based Regeneron said its REGEN-COV therapy, also called Ronapreve, is less effective against Omicron, though it is still active against the Delta variant, confirming indications from lab tests and computer modelling late last month

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/regeneron-says-antibody-therapy-has-lower-potency-against-omicron-2021-12-16/>

### **As COVID cases rise, Spain approves booster shots for over 40s**

Spain will administer a third dose of coronavirus vaccine to people aged 40 and over, the Health Ministry said on Thursday, expanding the booster programme a day after its child vaccination campaign kicked off amid a sharp rise in cases. The ministry, which had already rolled out booster shots for the over 60s, health workers and clinically vulnerable, said the most elderly remained the priority, as well as those yet to receive any shot. "Progressively, the booster dose may be administered to persons aged 49 to 40 years, starting with the oldest age cohorts," the ministry said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/covid-cases-rise-spain-approves-booster-shots-over-40s-2021-12-16/>

### **Denmark approves Merck's COVID-19 pill for at-risk patients**

Denmark on Thursday approved Merck & Co Inc's molnupiravir antiviral pill for COVID-19 patients at risk of serious illness, including the elderly. The treatment is still under review by the European Medicines Agency (EMA). Faced with rising coronavirus cases, the EU drug regulator issued advice in November on using it for adults ahead of providing any wider recommendation. Announcing its approval for restricted use in Denmark, Health Authority chief medical officer Kirstine Moll Harboe said: "We believe that the benefits of being treated (with it) outweigh the disadvantages for those patients who are most at risk of becoming seriously ill with COVID-19."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/denmark-approves-treatment-with-mercks-covid-19-tablet-molnupiravir-2021-12-16/>

## **Coronavirus Resurgence**

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### **New Mexico sheriff struggles in undertaker role as COVID deaths mount**

New Mexico sheriff Shane Ferrari is used to planning ahead to buy supplies like ammunition that have run short in the pandemic. In the past 12 months, he has also had to buy enough coffins and shelving for COVID-19 victims who are stacking up at the family funeral home that he found himself running. Ferrari took over the funeral business in Farmington, located in San Juan County in the state's northwest corner, last December when his father, the previous manager, died of COVID-19. He has been "overrun" with bodies as San Juan suffers one of the highest per-capita COVID-19 death rates in New Mexico, which is among the top five U.S. states in new cases for the week to Dec. 5, according to Reuters data.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/new-mexico-sheriff-struggles-in-undertaker-role-as-covid-deaths-mount/ar-AARSRc7>

### **Flu and Covid-19 cases rising in much of the US**

US health officials are bracing for a trio of public health concerns this winter: more infections from the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, surging infections with the Delta variant, and a "slow but steady" comeback of the flu. There is growing concern that a rise in Omicron cases, paired with climbing Delta cases and an increase in flu cases, could overwhelm health systems this winter, as well as possibly leading to a need to ramp up Covid-19 testing capacities, Lori Tremmel Freeman, chief executive officer of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), told CNN on Wednesday.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/15/health/flu-covid-increase-cdc/index.html>

### **South Korea reimposes COVID-19 curbs amid 'mayhem' at hospitals**

South Korea says it will reimpose curfews on businesses and tighten social distancing rules as the number of COVID-19 infections and severe cases reach record highs. The measures, announced on Thursday, come a month and a half after the South Korean government eased restrictions under a "Living with COVID-19" policy. But with new daily infections soaring and healthcare workers warning of "mayhem" at hospitals, the government has come under increased pressure to roll back the policy. Under the new rules, which will come into effect on Saturday, gatherings are limited to no more than four people, as long as they are fully vaccinated. Restaurants, cafes and bars will also need to close by 9pm and movie theatres and internet cafes by 10pm. Unvaccinated people can only dine out alone, or use takeout or delivery services.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/16/s-korea-reimposes-covid-19-curbs-amid-mayhem-at-hospitals>

### **COVID-19: UK's R number for Omicron between 3 and 5, health chief says**

"Each six months will be better than the last six months", England's chief medical officer has said, as he predicted it could be "possibly 18 months" until a wide range of vaccines covers all variants of the coronavirus. Professor Chris Whitty said it is likely that COVID vaccines and anti-viral drugs will do "almost all of the heavy lifting" when it comes to tackling future strains - unless they are "extremely different". He told the Commons Health and Social Care Committee: "If I project forward, I would anticipate in a number of years - possibly 18 months, possibly slightly less, possibly slightly more - that we will have polyvalent vaccines, which will cover a much wider range, and we will probably have several antivirals."

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-entirely-possible-omicron-hospitalisations-could-exceed-record-set-in-january-whitty-12497234>

### **COVID-19: Hundreds of thousands with coronavirus not using NHS app to 'ping' close contacts**

Hundreds of thousands of people who have tested positive for COVID-19 are not using the NHS contact tracing apps to alert their close contacts, despite the outbreak of the Omicron variant, new figures reveal. In Scotland less than 20% of people who have downloaded the contact tracing app are using it to inform people that they have tested positive. The Scottish government recently announced that contacts of infected people must isolate until they can take a PCR test, and the app is a key way of alerting them.

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-hundreds-of-thousands-with-coronavirus-not-using-nhs-app-to-ping-close-contacts-12496620>

### **President warns against complacency as Indonesia finds first Omicron case**

Indonesian President Joko Widodo urged people to stick to health protocols and ensure they are vaccinated against COVID-19, after the world's fourth most populous country detected its first domestic case of the Omicron variant. Jokowi, as the president is known, said the arrival of the

highly transmissible variant, which has been reported in more than 70 countries, had been inevitable and warned the public against being complacent while less stringent measures were in place.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-reports-first-case-omicron-variant-health-minister-2021-12-16/>

### **Poland reports its first case of Omicron COVID-19 variant - PAP**

Poland has detected its first case of the Omicron COVID-19 variant, a deputy health minister was cited as saying on Thursday by state-run news agency PAP. Waldemar Kraska said the variant had been detected by sanitary authorities in the southern city of Katowice, the agency reported. Poland has been dealing with persistently high daily case numbers in a fourth wave that has forced authorities to tighten restrictions.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-reports-first-case-omicron-covid-19-variant-pap-2021-12-16/>

### **S.Africa reports record daily COVID-19 cases as Omicron spreads**

South Africa reported a record number of new daily COVID-19 infections on Wednesday in a fourth wave believed to be largely caused by the Omicron coronavirus variant. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reported 26,976 new cases in the past 24 hours, surpassing a peak of 26,485 in early July during a third wave driven by the then-dominant Delta strain. The NICD also reported another 54 COVID-19 related deaths and an additional 620 hospital admissions.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-reports-record-daily-covid-19-infections-2021-12-15/>

### **South Korea to restore tougher curbs against spike in COVID-19 infections**

South Korea said on Thursday it will reinstate stricter social distancing rules a month-and-a-half after easing them under a 'living with COVID-19' policy, as the number of new infections and serious cases spirals. Curbs will return from Saturday to Jan. 2, limiting gatherings to no more than four people - as long as they are fully vaccinated - and forcing restaurants, cafes and bars to close by 9 p.m. and movie theatres and internet cafes by 10 p.m., officials said. Unvaccinated people can only dine out alone, or use takeout or delivery services.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-reinstate-distancing-curbs-amid-spike-covid-19-cases-2021-12-16/>

### **Queen Elizabeth cancels pre-Christmas lunch as COVID cases soar**

Queen Elizabeth has cancelled a pre-Christmas lunch with her family as a precaution while cases of COVID-19 soar in Britain, a Buckingham Palace source said. "The decision is a precautionary one as it is felt to put too many people's Christmas arrangements at risk if it went ahead. "While there is regret that it is cancelled, there is a belief it is the right thing to do for all."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/queen-elizabeth-cancels-pre-christmas-lunch-with-family-palace-source-2021-12-16/>

### **Britain's hospital admissions could hit new high with Omicron - chief medic**

New cases of COVID-19 in Britain hit a record high for the second day running on Thursday, as England's Chief Medical Officer warned daily hospital admissions could also hit new peaks due to the fast-spreading Omicron coronavirus variant. Britain reported 88,376 new infections, the highest since the start of the pandemic and up around 10,000 since the previous record set on Wednesday. The surge in cases was piling pressure on a health service struggling with staff sickness, England's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said on Thursday.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/some-british-hospitals-struggle-with-staff-shortages-due-covid-19-2021-12-16/>

### **British surge seen as warning on omicron but responses vary**

Soaring infections in Britain driven in part by the omicron variant of the coronavirus rattled Europe on Thursday, prompting new restrictions on the Continent and fueling a familiar dread on both sides of the Atlantic about entering a new phase of the pandemic just in time for the holidays. Much

remains unknown about omicron, but officials increasingly warn that it appears more transmissible than the delta variant, which has already put pressure on hospitals worldwide. With so many questions unanswered, uncertainty reigned over how quickly and how severely to crack down on Christmas travel and year-end parties. After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-travel-business-9eb16609e108037b165f71059aa2face>

### **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 was 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 lifesaving 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>