

Second Covid wave may have peaked in France: health agency

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France may be past the worst of its second wave of coronavirus infections, the country's health agency said Friday, warning however that protective measures should be kept in place.

Thanks to curfews and lockdowns, confirmed new infections dropped 40 percent last week, admissions to hospital fell 13 percent, and the number of new intensive care patients was down nine percent, Sante Publique France said.

The data provided fresh arguments for shop owners who have been lobbying to be allowed to reopen for the crucial Christmas period, while the government was trying to decide what to do about the coming Black Friday shopping splurge.

"Although indicators are still at high levels, they suggest that the peak of the second peak is behind us," the agency said.

The number of COVID deaths has stabilised after several weeks of increases, the agency said, with 3,756 recorded fatalities compared with 3,817 a week earlier.

'Direct impact'

French cities that imposed curfews earliest are now seeing the sharpest decreases in patient numbers, Sante Publique said.

Confinement measures were having "a direct impact" on patient statistics, which typically started to fall around 10 days after restrictions kicked in.

The government placed Paris and some other large cities on curfew on October 17, with others following suit a week later.

But since October 30, all of France has been under a lockdown, though it is less severe than the one seen in the spring, with schools still open and a wider range of shops still welcoming clients.

Sante Public said the "encouraging" statistics "should not make us forget that pending the availability of treatments and vaccines, the only way to slow the pandemic and lessen its impact on the health system is still to adopt individual prevention measures, combined with collective measures."

Health Minister Olivier Véran said Thursday that lifting the lockdown was not on the agenda for now.

On Friday, Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari warned that it was too early to say whether people would be able to travel at Christmas, saying the COVID trend reversal was still "fragile."

National rail operator SNCF has slashed train schedules by 70 percent, but is planning to ramp its network back to normal capacity starting December 15.

The French finance ministry on Friday was to discuss options concerning Black Friday, a day of sales promotions that falls on November 27 this year.

Originally a US retail fest, Black Friday has caught on across the world, with French luxury department store Galeries Lafayette saying it generated more revenue on Black Friday in 2019 than on any other day of the year.

Government officials said reopening brick-and-mortar stores on that day was one of the options on the table, but they feared that crowds flocking into shops could endanger progress made against infections.

Postponing Black Friday by a week was also up for discussion, they said.

French stores have complained that the retail day would unfairly benefit

online retail giants like Amazon if high street stores remained shuttered.

The head of Amazon's French operations, Frederic Duval, has said his company was in favour of moving Black Friday back to December 4 "if that allows shops and physical stores to reopen before December 1".

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