

Japan records high of daily virus cases, amid worrying spike

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Commuters wearing face masks to protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk on a street in Tokyo, Tuesday, Nov. 17, 2020. Japan has set a record for its daily new cases exceeding 2,100 cases of the coronavirus, the health ministry said Thursday, Nov. 19, 2020 as Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga called for maximum caution but without asking for restrictions on traveling or business activities. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Japan reported a record number of daily coronavirus infections Thursday, amid a worrying spike in a country that has been spared the worst of the pandemic and hopes to host the Olympics next year.

Compared to many other countries, Japan has done well combatting the virus, reporting just under 2,000 deaths in a nation of 126 million since the pandemic began. But Tokyo saw a record number of single-day cases twice this week, and the Health Ministry said Thursday that the national number hit a record with 2,179 new cases.

That's the first time Japan has had more than 2,000 daily cases since the pandemic began. The previous high was set Saturday.

Those figures are still quite low compared to many places around the world experiencing dangerous surges, and, while Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga urged the thorough use of masks Thursday, he did not call for reissuing restrictions on travel or business.

But experts on Tokyo's coronavirus panel called for officials to secure more beds for patients and hotel rooms for those with less serious symptoms before infections climb further.

"We must stop further escalation of the infections, no matter what," Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike told reporters. Koike expressed concerns about rising infections among elderly people, who are at high risk of becoming seriously ill when infected and could strain the medical system.



A man wearing a face mask gets off train in Tokyo on Thursday, Nov. 19, 2020. Japan's number of reported coronavirus infections hit a record high Thursday, and the prime minister urged maximum caution but stopped short of calling for restrictions on travel or business. (AP Photo/Hiro Komae)

The steady climb in cases now could call into question plans to hold the Olympics next summer after they were postponed because of the pandemic. IOC President Thomas Bach was in Japan earlier in the week to discuss the Games and said participants and fans would be encouraged to get vaccinated —assuming there's a vaccine in time—in order to protect the Japanese public.

The plan appears to be predicated on the idea that, with virus infections

low in Japan, the main risk is from people arriving from abroad. If cases surge in the host country, however, it's not clear how that would be addressed. Any plan will have to be firmed up beginning next month and in early 2021.

Experts say Japan's wide use of face masks as well as cultural traditions that don't include handshakes or kissing might have helped keep the country's caseload low. After Japan issued nonbinding stay-at-home and business closure requests in the spring, the number of cases leveled off, even as many people still commuted, picnicked in parks and dined at restaurants that stayed open. During a surge in the summer, Japan saw larger number of daily infections, but serious cases and deaths remained low.

The nationwide spike in cases now, especially in the populated Tokyo capital region and Hokkaido in the north, are alarming experts ahead of an upcoming three-day weekend and the winter holiday season, typically filled with travel and parties.



People wearing face masks walk across a traffic intersection in Tokyo on Thursday, Nov. 19, 2020. Japan's number of reported coronavirus infections hit a record high Thursday, and the prime minister urged maximum caution but stopped short of calling for restrictions on travel or business. (AP Photo/Hiro Komae)

Koike, the Tokyo governor, urged residents to increase their vigilance, asking them to meet in small groups when dining, to avoid sharing chopsticks or glasses, and to quickly leave after eating. She said stricter measures are not necessary at this point because the number of seriously ill patients is still at manageable levels.

"Your cooperation determines our fate," Koike said. "The key is not to

have serious cases and that's the red line."

Prime Minister Suga, meanwhile, instructed Cabinet ministers to do their utmost to tamp down on infections, but he said his government's tourism and dining incentives will continue, including the "GoTo eat" campaign that subsidizes dining out.

Groups dining out should be limited to four people, Suga said. He also asked people to wear masks when dining, removing them only when they put food in their mouths and immediately put them back on.



People wearing face masks walk through a shopping street in Tokyo on Thursday, Nov. 19, 2020. Japan's number of reported coronavirus infections hit a record high Thursday, and the prime minister urged maximum caution but stopped short of calling for restrictions on travel or business. (AP Photo/Hiro

Komae)



A shopper, second right, wearing a face mask buys sea food at a shopping street in Tokyo on Thursday, Nov. 19, 2020. Japan's number of reported coronavirus infections hit a record high Thursday, and the prime minister urged maximum caution but stopped short of calling for restrictions on travel or business. (AP Photo/Hiro Komae)



People dine in at bars and restaurants in Tokyo on Thursday, Nov. 19, 2020. Japan's number of reported coronavirus infections hit a record high Thursday, and the prime minister urged maximum caution but stopped short of calling for restrictions on travel or business. (AP Photo/Hiro Komae)

"I ask the people to quietly dine with masks," Suga said. "I will start thoroughly doing that myself."

As elsewhere, infections have gradually climbed back in Japan as the government tries to balance limiting the spread of the disease while avoiding too much damage to the economy with restrictions on business activity.

A top government panel expert, Shigeru Omi, warned a parliamentary

session Wednesday that groups of infections are now occurring in a variety of situations, making preventive measures more challenging and requiring the scaling down of economic and social activity.

"It's time to buckle up again,(asterisk) Omi said.

Japan Medical Association President Toshio Nakagawa urged Tokyo residents to stay home over the weekend.

Economy Revitalization Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura has said that groups in the service industry are revising their safety guidelines to step up preventive measures at restaurants and bars where risks are deemed high.

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