

Brisbane locks down as new strains put Australia on high alert

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Australia's third-largest city of Brisbane was in its first day of a snap lockdown on Saturday, with officials elsewhere on "high alert" over the emergence of more contagious strains of COVID-19.

The usually bustling shopping strip in the [city centre](#) was eerily quiet Saturday, with only a small number of masked locals venturing out for essential reasons after officials announced a three-day [lockdown](#) from Friday evening.

"Quite surreal, like something from a movie set," local man Scott told AFP, in an empty city street.

"It's necessary—hopefully we will get through the next few days without any cases, that will allow us just to start to get back to normal."

Highways into the [city](#)—which is usually a popular destination for Australian holidaymakers—were deserted as tourists were told to stay away until the lockdown ends.

The stay-at-home order for Brisbane's more than two million residents was triggered after the UK strain of the virus spread from a returned traveller to a cleaner at a quarantine hotel—Australia's first recorded local case of the variant.

The UK strain is among several emerging variants around the world believed to be more infectious than those which have spread previously.

Authorities also issued a warning for passengers of a flight that arrived in Brisbane from Melbourne earlier this month, after a woman tested positive for the UK strain despite already undergoing a period of isolation.

"The risk is extremely low—very, very, very low—because she (the traveller) is right at the end of her potential infectious period," Queensland's Chief Health Officer Jeannette Young told media.

"But because of this new variant, we're just being ultra-cautious."

The news comes as parts of Sydney prepared to end a weeks-long lockdown at midnight, following an outbreak which emerged last month.

New South Wales Health Minister Brad Hazzard said the state remained on "high alert" due to an increasing number of quarantined travellers testing positive for new variants of COVID-19.

"Obviously, there was a hope we might have entered 2021 with no COVID, but it's here to stay," he added.

Fears of a more infectious strain spreading through the community prompted Australia to announce a temporary cut to international arrivals and tighten quarantine arrangements.

Until the lockdown, Brisbane had been among several Australian cities enjoying a return to relative normality due to the country's success in suppressing the virus.

Australia has recorded more than 28,500 COVID-19 cases and 909 deaths linked to the virus, in a population of about 25 million.

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