

UK virus surge leads to record daily deaths and hospitals like 'war zones'

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Some British hospitals resemble a "war zone" due to the influx of coronavirus patients in the country's latest wave of the disease, the government's chief scientific adviser said Wednesday.

The grim assessment by Patrick Vallance came as the UK announced another 1,820 fatalities from COVID-19, breaking Tuesday's record daily toll and taking the total number of deaths within 28 days of a positive test result to 93,290.

Britain's mortality rate has risen nearly 15 percent over the past week, as surging infection rates throughout December have now fed into increasing hospital admissions and deaths.

The sobering situation follows the emergence of a new strain of the virus across the country in recent months, heaping fresh pressure on overstretched health services and overwrought medical staff.

"When you go into a hospital, this is very, very bad at the moment with enormous pressure and in some cases it looks like a war zone in terms of the things that people are having to deal with," Vallance told Sky News.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has faced persistent criticism over his handling of the crisis, called the latest figures "appalling" and braced Britons for further bad news.

"There will be more to come because what we're seeing is the result of the wave of the new variant that we saw just before Christmas," he told reporters from Downing Street.

After easing restrictions briefly for much of the country over Christmas, Johnson imposed another lockdown earlier this month while banking on an unprecedented vaccination drive to try to return life to normality.

'Keep a grip on this'

More than four million people have received a jab since the programme began in early December, with the government aiming to inoculate the

entire adult population by the autumn.

But Vallance warned that "vaccines are not going to do the heavy lifting for us at the moment", and efforts to cut the close-contact spread of the virus are needed for some time to come.

"This is about, I'm afraid, the restrictive measures which we're all living under and carrying on with those," he added.

"The numbers are nowhere near where they need to be at the moment, they need to come down quite a lot further—we need to make sure we stick with it."

Britain is currently locked down for the third time since the start of the outbreak early last year. Schools and non-essential shops are closed, social mixing and travel are restricted.

A review of the measures is due in mid-February, with hopes that stay-at-home orders can begin to be lifted.

New cases have begun to fall after weeks of rises, with the number of fresh infections recorded over the last seven days down nearly a quarter.

But both Johnson and Vallance insisted Wednesday that the eventual easing of restrictions would not be swift.

"It's true that it looks as though the rates of infection in the country overall may now be peaking or flattening but they're not flattening very fast and it's clear that we must keep a grip on this," Johnson said.

"We must maintain discipline, formation, keep observing the lockdown."

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