

EU agency urges preparation of stronger measures over virus variants

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The EU disease agency ECDC on Thursday urged countries to prepare more stringent measures and speed up vaccine campaigns in the coming weeks because of the risks of more infectious variants of the novel coronavirus.

The European Centre Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said in a new report that countries in the EU and European Economic Area "should expect increased numbers of COVID-19 cases due to the gradual spread and possible dominance of the variants with increased transmissibility."

"The key message is to prepare for a rapid escalation of the stringency of response measures in the coming weeks to safeguard healthcare capacity and to accelerate vaccination campaigns," the agency said.

According to the agency the "rate and scale" of the spread would depend on the level of prevention measures and adherence to those measures.

The ECDC said that some 16,800 cases of a new more infectious variant of the novel [coronavirus](#) had been identified in the UK, where it was first discovered and some 2,000 cases in 60 countries around the world as of Tuesday, of which 1,300 cases were in 23 countries in the EU and EEA area.

Around 570 cases of another variant, also more infectious, first discovered in South Africa have been detected in 23 countries, with 27 cases in 10 EU/EEA countries, in addition to the 349 cases confirmed in South Africa as of January 13.

The ECDC also urged members to monitor changes in transmission rates or infection severity to identify and assess the circulation and impact of variants, and also to prepare laboratories for increased testing.

It also said countries should increase the number of vaccination centres and vaccination staff to speed up the rollout of the COVID-19 jabs.

Even though many countries have already begun vaccinations and have strict measures in place the ECDC cautioned against relaxing measures,

"since the [population groups](#) driving transmission will not be targeted with vaccination for some months."

It said because of the evidence of higher transmissibility of the new variants, authorities should be ready to enforce even stricter measures, "communicating and engaging with the population to encourage compliance".

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