

# UK hospitals stagger under toll from the new virus variant

January 5 2021, by Danica Kirka

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A man wearing a British union flag face mask walks past a coronavirus advice sign outside a bank in Glasgow the morning after stricter lockdown measures came into force for Scotland, Tuesday Jan. 5, 2021. Further measures were put in place Tuesday as part of lockdown restrictions in a bid to halt the spread of the coronavirus.(Andrew Milligan/PA via AP)

England's National Health Service is accustomed to tough winters—and caring for people on overcrowded wards sometimes means moving patients into the corridor. But this is different. Now some are lucky just to get medical help as they wait in an ambulance in the parking lot.

Pressure on the nation's hospitals forced the hand of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has plunged the country into its third national lockdown and ordered everyone to stay at home as much as possible for at least the next six weeks. The situation is worsening, said Siva Anandaciva, chief analyst of the King's Fund think tank.

"It's not hyperbole to say that the (National Health Service) is going through probably the toughest time in living memory," he told The Associated Press. Anandaciva said some emergency rooms have waits of 12 hours.

"I was speaking to an emergency care physician from London last week, and she was saying that half of her shift was spent delivering care in ambulances because they couldn't get the patients into the emergency department," he said. "So you put that all together and you paint a picture of the health service that's under incredible pressure."

Johnson announced the tough new stay-at-home order for England that takes effect at midnight Tuesday and won't be reviewed until at least mid-February. Few in England expect any relief until after the traditional late February school break.



A woman runs past some graffiti in Edinburgh, the morning after stricter COVID-19 lockdown measures came into force for mainland Scotland, Tuesday Jan. 5, 2021. (Andrew Milligan/PA via AP)

"The weeks ahead will be the hardest yet, but I really do believe that we are entering the last phase of the struggle," Johnson told the nation Monday night. "Because with every jab that goes into our arms, we are tilting the odds against COVID and in favor of the British people."

Scotland's leader, Nicola Sturgeon, also imposed a lockdown that began Tuesday. Northern Ireland and Wales had already imposed tough measures, though rules vary.

Johnson and Sturgeon said the restrictions were needed to protect the

hard-pressed National Health Service as a new, more contagious variant of coronavirus sweeps across Britain. On Monday, hospitals in England were treating 26,626 COVID-19 patients, 40% more than during the first peak in mid-April.

Many U.K. hospitals have already been forced to cancel elective surgeries and the strain of responding to the pandemic may soon delay cancer surgery and limit intensive care services for patients without COVID-19. Intensive care units are full and spilling over.



14-year old student Isla Stanton, begins her home school lesson via a video link, in Ashford, south England, Tuesday Jan 5, 2021, following new lockdown measures to limit the coronavirus including the closure of schools. The lockdown and home schooling has become a major issue, highlighting the wealth divide with provision of internet connectivity, equipment issues and the impact on

upcoming school exams. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has set out further measures including closure of schools as part of a seven week lockdown period in a bid to halt the spread of the coronavirus.(Gareth Fuller/PA via AP)

Public health officials hope the new lockdown will reduce the strains on the NHS while they roll out a national vaccination program that targets older people, health care workers and those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Britain has approved vaccine shots from two different manufacturers so far—one from Pfizer-BioNTech and the other from Oxford University and AstraZeneca.

The government hopes to give a first dose of vaccine to everyone in its top four priority groups, or 13 million people, by the middle of February, Johnson said.

While the rollout is complicated, Anandaciva said the structure of the NHS will help it deliver the vaccinations. Besides hospitals, doctors and nurses, it can rely on other allied health care professionals, such as pharmacists, to give vaccine shots.

"That's one area where you can really maximize the benefits of having a nationalized service because you can ... establish hubs, you can pool staff, and you've got a very strong brand to attract people," he said. "I think the NHS is doing quite a good job of setting up the logistics of how you will get the vaccine into the right places."



Nearly empty pavements on the normally busy Quayside in Newcastle upon Tyne, northern England, early Tuesday Jan. 5, 2021, the morning after new stay home coronavirus restrictions were imposed. Prime Minister Boris Johnson set out further measures including closure of schools as part of a seven week lockdown period in England in a bid to halt the spread of the coronavirus. (Owen Humphreys/PA via AP)

In the meantime, grants are being given to help businesses further strained by the new rules. Grants of up to 9,000 pounds (\$12,200) will be offered to businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors.

"The new strain of the virus presents us all with a huge challenge—and, whilst the vaccine is being rolled out, we have needed to tighten restrictions further," Treasury chief Rishi Sunak said. "Throughout the pandemic we've taken swift action to protect lives and livelihoods and

today we're announcing a further cash injection to support businesses and jobs until the spring."

Johnson announced the lockdown after the chief medical officers of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales raised the U.K.-wide COVID-19 threat assessment to the highest level. The health system is already under "immense pressure," they said.



A man crosses the street backdropped by the Royal Exchange in the City of London financial district in London, Jan. 5, 2021, on the first morning of England entering a third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday night announced a tough new stay-at-home order that will last at least six weeks, as authorities struggle to stem a surge in COVID-19 infections that threatens to overwhelm hospitals around the U.K. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks during a news conference in response to the ongoing situation with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, inside 10 Downing Street in London, Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2021. England is entering a third national lockdown that will last at least six weeks, as authorities struggle to stem a surge in COVID-19 infections that threatens to overwhelm hospitals around the U.K. (Hannah McKay/Pool photo via AP)





People walk across London Bridge, in London, backdropped by the Shard, the tallest skyscraper in Britain, Jan. 5, 2021, on the first morning of England entering a third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday night announced a tough new stay-at-home order, as authorities struggle to stem a surge in COVID-19 infections that threatens to overwhelm hospitals around the U.K. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



A person walks with an umbrella in light rain in the City of London financial district in London, Jan. 5, 2021, on the first morning of England entering a third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday night announced a tough new stay-at-home order, as authorities struggle to stem a surge in COVID-19 infections that threatens to overwhelm hospitals around the U.K. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



A woman crosses an empty road in Glasgow city centre, Scotland the morning after stricter COVID-19 lockdown measures came into force for mainland Scotland Tuesday Jan. 5, 2021. (Andrew Milligan/PA via AP)



Quiet streets near Edinburgh Castle, the morning after stricter COVID-19 lockdown measures came into force for mainland Scotland, Tuesday Jan. 5, 2021. (Andrew Milligan/PA via AP)



A man wearing a face mask to curb the spread of coronavirus walks past traditional red phone boxes in the City of London financial district in London, Jan. 5, 2021, on the first morning of England entering a third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday night announced a tough new stay-at-home order that will last at least six weeks, as authorities struggle to stem a surge in COVID-19 infections that threatens to overwhelm hospitals around the U.K. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



Mounted police officers ride horses as they patrol the City of London financial district in London, Jan. 5, 2021, on the first morning of England entering a third national lockdown since the coronavirus outbreak began. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday night announced a tough new stay-at-home order that will last at least six weeks, as authorities struggle to stem a surge in COVID-19 infections that threatens to overwhelm hospitals around the U.K. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

The new measures are similar to those imposed last spring, with people being told to work from home unless it's impossible to do so, and to leave home only for exercise or essential trips such as grocery shopping. Schools across England were ordered to close their doors except for the children of critical workers and most vulnerable children, and shift to online instruction beginning Tuesday. University students won't return to

campus until at least mid-February.

All nonessential shops and personal care services like hairdressers will stay closed. Restaurants will be allowed to offer takeout services only.

New COVID-19 infections have soared in recent weeks as public health officials struggled to contain the new variant, which the government says is 50% to 70% more contagious. The number of confirmed new daily infections in the past seven days jumped 50% from the previous week, and coronavirus-related deaths rose 21% in the same period.

Britain has been seeing over 50,000 new infections a day for a week and has reported 75,500 virus-related deaths overall, one of the highest tallies in Europe.

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