

Shops, haircuts return in April as UK lifts lockdown slowly

February 22 2021, by Jill Lawless and Danica Kirka



In this Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021 file photo, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson holds a vial of the Oxford/Astra Zeneca Covid-19 vaccine at a vaccination centre in Cwmbran, south Wales. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (Geoff Caddick/Pool via AP, File)

Children in England will return to class and people will be able to meet a friend outside for coffee in two weeks' time, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced Monday as he laid out a slow easing of one of Europe's strictest pandemic lockdowns.

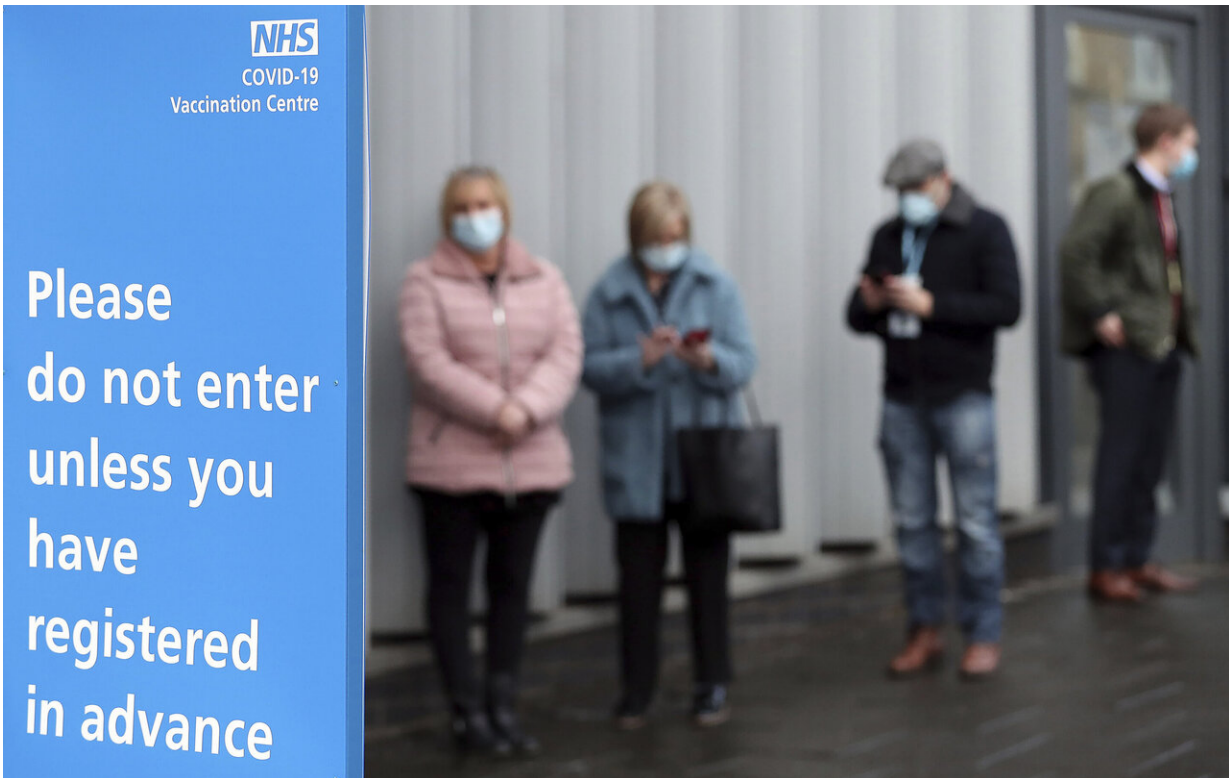
But those longing for a haircut, a restaurant meal or a pint in a pub have almost two months to wait, and people won't be able to hug loved ones that they don't live with until May at the earliest.

Johnson said [the government's plan](#) would move the country "cautiously but irreversibly" out of lockdown.

"We're setting out on what I hope is a one-way road to freedom," he told lawmakers in the House of Commons.

Britain has had Europe's deadliest coronavirus outbreak, with more than 120,000 deaths,. Faced with a dominant virus variant that scientists say is both more transmissible and more deadly than the original virus, the country has spent much of the winter under a tight lockdown—the third since March 2020. Bars, restaurants, gyms, schools, hair salons and nonessential shops are closed, people are urged not to travel out of their local area and foreign holidays are illegal.

That will begin to change, slowly, on March 8, when children go back to school and people are allowed to meet one friend or relative for a chat or picnic outdoors. Three weeks later, people will be able to meet in small groups outdoors for sports or relaxation.



In this Monday, Jan. 11, 2021 file photo, people wait in line for the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine at the mass vaccination centre in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (AP Photo/Scott Heppell, File)

Under the government plan, shops and hairdressers will reopen April 12. So will pubs and restaurants, though only outdoors. Indoor venues such as theaters and cinemas, and indoor seating in bars and restaurants, are scheduled to open May 17, and limited crowds will be able to return to sports stadiums. It is also the earliest date Britons may be allowed foreign holidays.

The final stage of the plan, in which all legal limits on social contact are removed and nightclubs can reopen after 15 months of closure, is set for June 21.

The government says the dates could all be postponed if infections rise.

The measures being announced apply to England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have slightly different lockdowns in place, with some children returning to class in Scotland and Wales on Monday.

Hopes for a return to normality rest largely on Britain's fast-moving inoculation program that has given more than 17.5 million people, a third of the country's adult population, the first of two doses of vaccine. The government aims is to give every adult a shot of vaccine by July 31.

Johnson said vaccines would help Britain put "a wretched year" behind it.



In this Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021 file photo, Britain's Health Secretary Matt Hancock takes a selfie with the vaccine hub staff during a visit to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, England, to thank volunteers undertaking clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccinations. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (Molly Darlington/Pool via AP, File)

But the government cautions that the return of the country's social and economic life will be slow. Johnson's Conservative government was accused of reopening the country too quickly after the first lockdown in the spring and of rejecting scientific advice before a short "circuit-breaker" lockdown in the fall.

It does not want to make the same mistakes again, although Johnson is under pressure from some Conservative lawmakers and business owners, who argue that restrictions should be lifted quickly to revive the battered economy.

The Conservative government—in normal times an opponent of lavish public spending—spent 280 billion pounds (\$393 billion) in 2020 to deal with the pandemic, including billions paying the salaries of almost 10 million furloughed workers.

British Chambers of Commerce Director General Adam Marshall welcomed the "clarity" about reopening dates, but said that "the future of thousands of firms and millions of jobs still hangs by a thread."

Johnson said the government's annual budget statement on March 3 would contain new measures "to protect jobs and livelihoods across the U.K."

The government says further easing will depend on vaccines proving effective at lowering hospitalization and deaths, infection rates remaining low and no new virus variants emerging that throw the plans into disarray.



In this Monday, Jan. 25, 2021 file photo, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson watches a patient receiving a dose of the Oxford AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, during a visit to Barnet FC's ground at the Hive, which is being used as a coronavirus vaccination centre, in London. The British government says it aims to give every adult in the country a first dose of coronavirus vaccine by July 31, a month earlier than its previous target. In addition, the goal is for everyone over 50 or with an underlying health condition to get a shot by April 15, rather than the previous target of May 1. (Stefan Rousseau/Pool Photo via AP, File)

Two U.K. studies released Monday showed that COVID-19 vaccination programs are contributing to a sharp drop in illness and hospitalization, boosting hopes that the shots will work as well in the real world as they have in carefully controlled studies.

Preliminary results from a study in Scotland found that the Pfizer vaccine reduced hospital admissions by up to 85% four weeks after the first dose, while the AstraZeneca shot cut admissions by up to 94%. In England, preliminary data from a study of health care workers showed that the Pfizer vaccine reduced the risk of catching COVID-19 by 70% after one dose, a figure that rose to 85% after the second.

Scientists stressed that the results were preliminary.

Johnson said that even with vaccines, reopening society would inevitably lead to more infections and deaths.

He said there is "no credible route to a zero-COVID Britain, or indeed, a zero-COVID world."

But, he added, "we cannot persist indefinitely with restrictions that debilitate our economy, our physical and mental wellbeing and the life chances of our children."

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