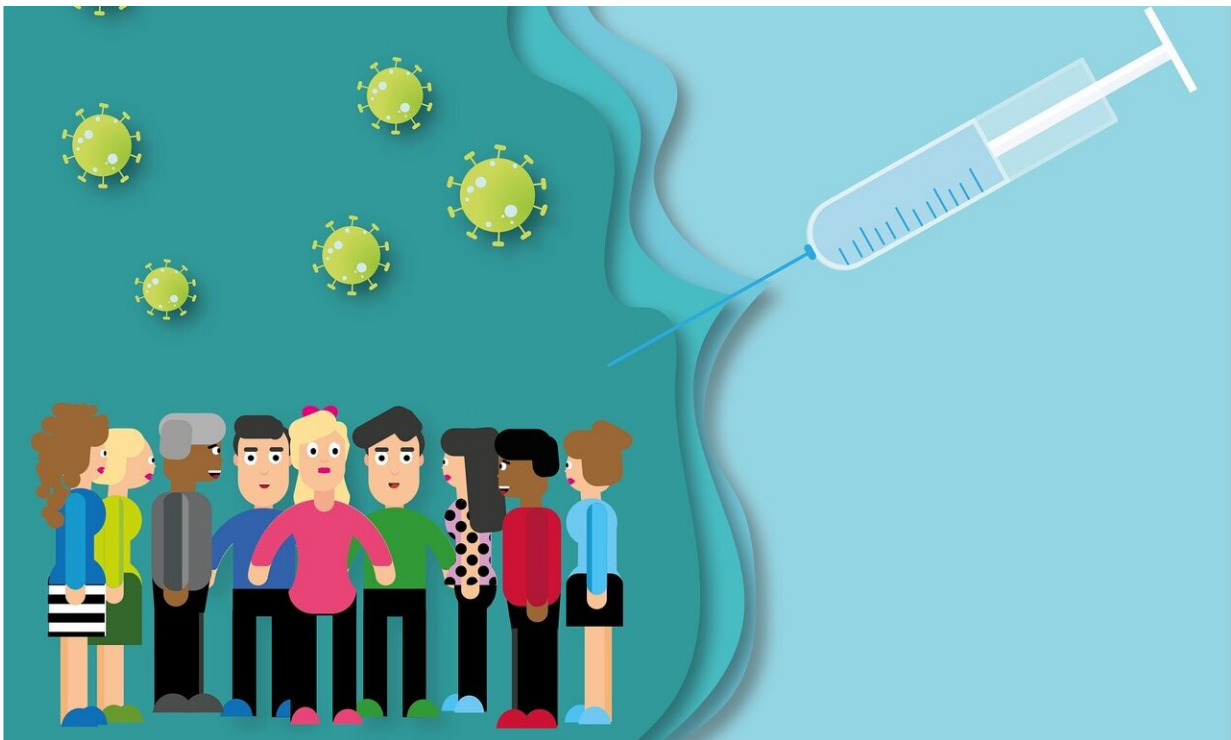


Qatar races mounting virus toll with vaccine drive

March 31 2021



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Qatar is stepping up its coronavirus vaccination drive, officials said Wednesday, with new daily cases almost quadrupling since January and prompting calls for a renewed lockdown.

While the country's death toll per capita is low, almost 5 percent of

deaths since the beginning of the pandemic were during the past week, with authorities blaming the more potent British strain.

Medical experts have called for a return to the strict summer lockdown that saw new daily cases plummet from 2,355 at the end of May to 235 by July 31.

But Rashid Andaila, a manager at a vaccination point south of Doha, said the vaccine drive was gathering steam, with a second drive-through clinic opened on Sunday for second doses.

"Our capability is 5,000 at each site," he said. "This stage of the vaccine (programme) is getting bigger and bigger."

Over 25,000 vaccine jabs were administered on Tuesday, bringing the total to 816,484 doses, according to official data.

Qatar has a mostly expatriate population of 2.75 million.

"We are expecting more people will come," Andaila said, as dozens of cars and trucks queued with the Al-Janoub World Cup stadium in the background.

Qatar reported 780 new infections on Wednesday as well as two deaths, bringing the total COVID-19 [death toll](#) in the country to 291, while active cases reached 571 per 100,000.

Nearly one in five of Wednesday's new cases were among residents and citizens returning from abroad, official statistics showed.

And despite the accelerating vaccine drive, some officials have called for a renewed lockdown.

"A full lockdown, like we had during last summer when roads were empty and people worked at home, is the best way to stem the virus' spread," Ahmed al-Mohammed, chair of Qatar's intensive care service, told state television this week.

The number of [coronavirus](#) patients in [intensive care](#) has more than doubled since March, he added, with 338 people in ICU beds as well as a further 1,668 patients receiving acute care.

"It is clear that people are becoming sicker and experiencing more [severe symptoms](#) in this second wave," Mohammed said.

A senior expatriate advisor to the health authorities resigned earlier this year following disagreements on how to tackle mounting cases and the new variants, three sources told AFP.

Household visits and weddings are currently banned in Qatar, communal pools and gyms closed, and cinemas restricted to over-18s.

But offices, shops, bars and restaurants all remain open, with capacity limits.

Mosques face fewer restrictions but are limited to opening at set prayer times only.

Major sports events including WTA and ATP tennis tournaments and the FIFA Club World Cup have proceeded in recent months with reduced crowds.

The rollout of Qatar's vaccination programme was initially slowed down after Pfizer failed to fully deliver three shipments of inoculations, a medical source told AFP, but it has since proceeded as planned.

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