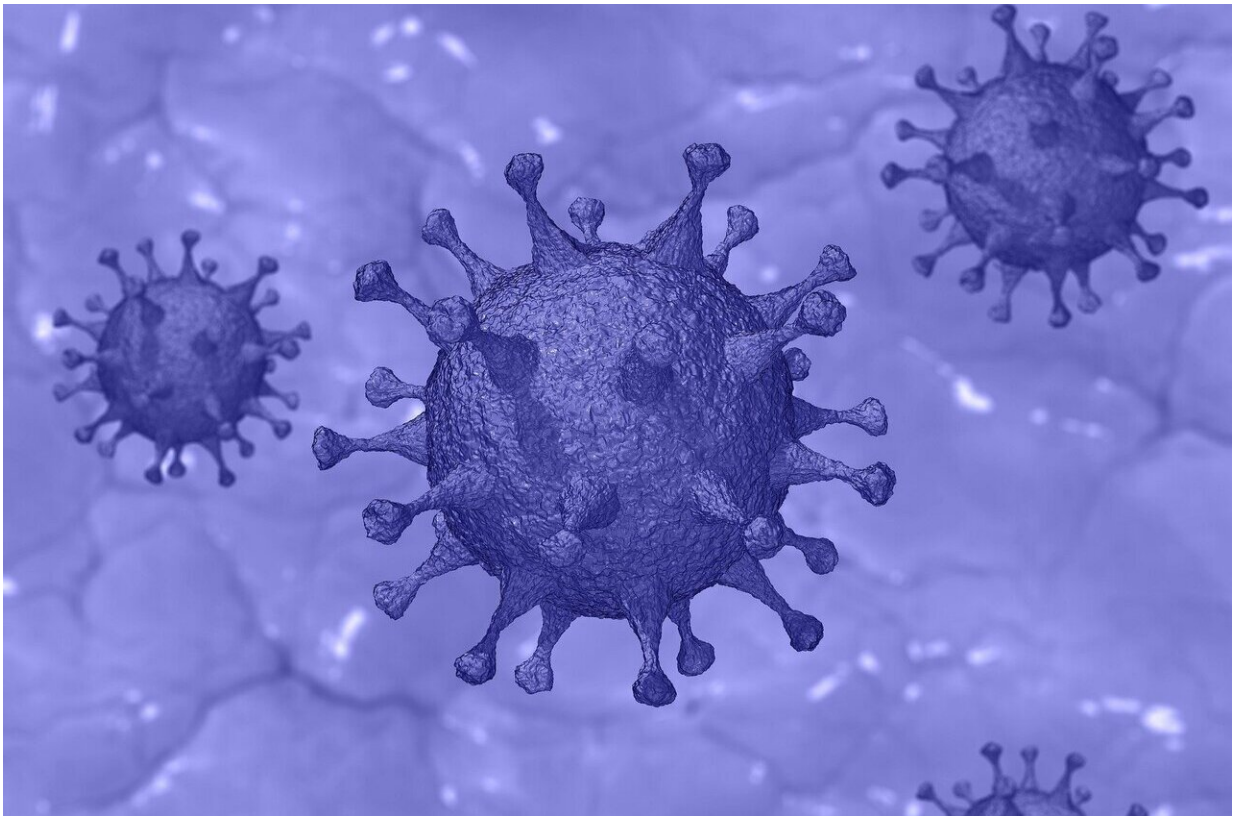


WHO says virus strain in India a 'variant of concern' as Europe eases curbs

May 10 2021



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Schools and stores reopened in parts of Europe on Monday, easing out of months of COVID-19 lockdowns, but the devastating outbreak raged on across the sub-continent and health experts declared the virus mutation

in India a "variant of concern".

The World Health Organization in Geneva said the B.1.617 variant spreading in India appears to be more contagious.

"As such, we are classifying this as a variant of concern at the global level," said WHO's COVID-19 lead Maria Van Kerkove.

The virus is still surging in many countries and the pandemic has killed close to 3.3 million people worldwide since late 2019, upending normal life and causing global economic chaos.

But rapid vaccination programmes have allowed a number of wealthy nations to start taking steps towards normality.

Ireland on Monday lifted domestic travel restrictions and began a phased reopening of non-essential retailers, while Greece opened nursery, elementary and middle schools ahead of kicking off the tourist season from May 14.

Tourism might get a shot in the arm from the European Union which said it was "fully on track" to ensure a COVID health pass would be ready in June to boost travel.

Britain, which has the highest COVID-19 death toll in Europe, announced the reopening of indoor seating in pubs and restaurants in England from next week.

"This unlocking amounts to a very considerable step on the road back to normality," said Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

The latest easing of restrictions came as England reported no daily virus deaths for the first time in over a year following a successful vaccination

campaign

Act 'responsibly'

Spain, which at the weekend lifted a six-month state of emergency and allowed travel between regions, sounded a note of caution after joyful crowds celebrated in the streets mask-less and without observing social distancing.

"The end of the state of emergency does not mean the end of restrictions. Far from it. The virus threat still exists," Justice Minister Juan Carlos Campo wrote in El Pais, urging Spaniards to behave "responsibly."

Cyprus on Monday exited a third partial lockdown with a new coronavirus "safety pass" system to allow people to move freely.

And in Germany, people fully vaccinated against COVID-19 were exempt from many restrictions from Sunday after the government passed new legislation.

Berlin also opened access to the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine to all adults on Monday, lifting a priority system.

But in Norway, an expert government committee recommended the Johnson & Johnson and the AstraZeneca jabs be dropped over the risks of rare but serious side effects.

Meanwhile, German firm BioNTech, which developed a vaccine with US pharma giant Pfizer, announced a \$200 million joint venture with China's Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical to produce up to one billion jabs a year and said it was building its own Southeast Asia manufacturing site in Singapore.

India variant worries

India, suffering from one of the worst outbreaks in the world, reported nearly 370,000 fresh infections and more than 3,700 new deaths on Monday.

The devastating wave has overwhelmed India's healthcare system, and experts have said official figures for cases and fatalities are much lower than the actual numbers.

BionTech on Monday sought to allay fears around the mutation in India, saying that "to date, there is no evidence" that the jab needs to be adapted to fight the emerging variants.

The outbreak has spread to some of India's neighbours, including Nepal.

And China plans to set up a "separation line" on the summit of Mount Everest—which straddles the China-Nepal border—to avoid infections by climbers from Nepal, where dozens have been taken ill at base camp, state media reported.

Glimpse of the future?

The world got a glimpse of post-pandemic life as Tokyo hosted a test event ahead of the Summer Olympic Games.

"It's weird running in a stadium with no fans," US sprinter Justin Gatlin said after winning the men's 100m.

Yet International Olympic Committee chief Thomas Bach was forced to postpone a visit to Japan, organisers said Monday, after a coronavirus state of emergency was extended less than three months before the

Tokyo Games.

The United States remains the worst-hit nation in the world, with the highest number of known fatalities and infections.

But the real death toll may be higher than the official figure of 581,000, with a University of Washington study released last week estimating deaths at more than 900,000.

The United States was battered by the pandemic, but since January new infections have come down as more than 114 million people have been fully vaccinated.

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Citation: WHO says virus strain in India a 'variant of concern' as Europe eases curbs (2021, May 10) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-virus-strain-india-variant-europe.html>

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