

Europe in vaccination race against COVID-19's delta variant

July 3 2021, by Barry Hatton



In this June 7, 2021, file photo, tourists sunbathe on the beach at the Spanish Balearic Island of Mallorca, Spain. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Francisco Ubilla, File

Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations and outpace the spread of the more infectious delta variant, in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives.

The urgency coincides with Europe's summer holidays, with fair weather bringing more social gatherings and governments reluctant to clamp down on them. Social distancing is being neglected, especially among the young, and some countries are scrapping the requirement to wear masks outdoors.

Incentives for people to get shots include free groceries, travel and entertainment vouchers, and prize drawings. The president of Cyprus even appealed to a sense of patriotism.

The risk of infection from the delta variant is "high to very high" for partially or unvaccinated communities, according to the European Centre for Disease Control, which monitors 30 countries on the continent. It estimates that by the end of August, the variant will account for 90% of cases in the European Union's 27 nations.

"It is very important to progress with the vaccine rollout at a very high pace," the ECDC warned.

The World Health Organization is also concerned. The variant makes transmission growth "exponential," according to Maria Van Kerkhove, its technical lead on COVID-19.



In this June 29, 2021, file photo, people ride the escalator in the subway amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in St. Petersburg, Russia. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Daily new case numbers are already climbing sharply in countries like the United Kingdom, Portugal and Russia. Credit: AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky, File

Daily new case numbers are already climbing sharply in countries like the United Kingdom, Portugal and Russia.

In the U.K., cases of the delta variant have increased fourfold in less than a month, with confirmed cases Friday up 46% on the previous

week.

Portuguese health authorities this week reported a "vertiginous" rise in the delta variant, which accounted for only 4% of cases in May but almost 56% in June. The country is reporting its highest number of daily cases since February, and the number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals has surpassed 500 for the first time since early April.

[Reports of new infections in Russia](#) more than doubled in June, topping 20,000 per day this week, and new deaths hit 697 on Saturday, the fifth day in a row that the daily death toll set a record.

Still, "no one wants any lockdowns," said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov at a briefing, although he admitted that the virus situation in a number of Russian regions is "tense."



In this May 13, 2021, file photo, men are administered the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at the Severo Ochoa Hospital in Leganes, outskirts of Madrid, Spain. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Bernat Armangue, File

In some countries, the virus is spreading much faster among younger people. In Spain, the national 14-day case notification rate per 100,000 people rose to 152 on Friday. But for the 20-29 age group, it shot up to 449.

Those numbers have triggered alarm across the continent.

The Dutch government is extending its vaccination program to those aged 12-17 to help head off a feared new surge. Greece is offering young adults 150 euros (\$177) in credit after their first jab. Rome authorities are mulling the use of vans to vaccinate people at the beach. And Poland last week launched a lottery open only to adults who are fully vaccinated, with new cars among the prizes.

Portuguese authorities have extended the hours of vaccination centers, created new walk-in clinics, called up the armed forces to help run vaccination operations, and reduced the period between taking the two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from 12 weeks to eight weeks.



In this June 26, 2021, file photo, medical workers carry a patient suspected of having coronavirus on a stretcher at a hospital in Kommunarka, outside Moscow, Russia. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, File

"We're in a race against the clock," Cabinet Minister Mariana Vieira da Silva said.

In the fight against vaccine hesitancy across Europe, the appearance of variants has fed public uncertainty about how effective the shots are. In Madrid this week, Claudia Aguilar, a 58-year-old archaeologist, got her second Pfizer-BioNTech jab at an auditorium that is expanding its

working hours overnight.

Nevertheless, she said she is "not sure I'll really be immune" against future variants.

"I mean, I'm a bit skeptical that this is going to do any good," Aguilar said.

Bartender Yevgeniya Chernyshkova lined up for a shot at Moscow's GUM department store just off Red Square after the Russian government required vaccinations for workers in some sectors.

"Now, it's becoming mandatory and we all understand why—because the third wave of the pandemic has started here," she said.



In this June 23, 2021, file photo, a nurse prepares doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at an inoculation center operated by the Portuguese armed forces at Lisbon University's sports stadium. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca, File

Fifteen months after WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, some governments appear more open to rewarding public patience than thinking about bringing back restrictions.

Some 40,000 fans went to England's European Championship soccer match against Germany at London's Wembley Stadium last week. In Portugal, new restrictions have been half-hearted, such as limiting restaurant opening hours on weekend nights.

In Moscow, however, restaurants, bars and cafes on Monday began admitting only customers who have been vaccinated, recovered from COVID-19 in the past six months or can provide a negative test in the previous 72 hours.

France lifted the last of its major restrictions Wednesday, allowing unlimited crowds in restaurants, at weddings and most cultural events despite fast-rising cases of the delta variant.



In this June 23, 2021, file photo, people wait in a recovery area after getting shots of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at an inoculation center operated by the Portuguese armed forces at Lisbon University's sports stadium. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca, File



In this June 17, 2021, file photo, people take a selfie with the Arc de Triomphe in the background at the Champs Elysees avenue in Paris. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Michel Euler, File



In this June 29, 2021, file photo, England's Harry Kane, center, celebrates after scoring his side's second goal during the Euro 2020 soccer championship round of 16 match between England and Germany at Wembley stadium in London. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Frank Augstein, Pool, File



In this June 5, 2021, file photo, people wearing face masks to protect against the spread of coronavirus, walk along a commercial street in downtown Madrid, Spain. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Manu Fernandez, File



In this June 25, 2021, file photo, people walk along the beach on a summer's day in Benidorm, southeast Spain. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Alvaro Barrientos, File



In this June 28, 2021, file photo, France's fans cheer prior to the Euro 2020 soccer championship round of 16 match between France and Switzerland in the old city district of Bucharest, Romania. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru, File



In this July 2, 2021, file photo, people wait in line to get a coronavirus vaccine at a vaccination center at VDNKh (The Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy) in Moscow, Russia. Countries across Europe are scrambling to accelerate coronavirus vaccinations to outpace the spread of the delta variant in a high-stakes race to prevent hospital wards from filling up again with patients fighting for their lives. Daily new case numbers are already climbing sharply in countries like the United Kingdom, Portugal and Russia. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, File

Tiago Correia, an associate professor at Lisbon's Institute of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, detects a mood of public impatience, especially among young people keen to enjoy warm summer nights.

"People want to return to normal more quickly than the vaccination

rollout is happening," he said.

The emerging variants have shone a light on the unprecedented scale of the immunization programs. The ECDC says in the countries it surveys, 61% of people over 18 have had one shot and 40% are completely vaccinated.

But Dr. Hans Kluge, the head of the WHO's Europe office, cautioned this week that the delta variant is poised to become dominant by August in the 53-country region his office covers. And he notes that 63% of people in that region haven't had a first jab.

"The three conditions for a new wave of excess hospitalizations and deaths before the (fall) are therefore in place: New variants, deficit in vaccine uptake, increased social mixing," Kluge said.

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