

Johnson says restrictions to ease, UK must live with virus

July 5 2021, by Jill Lawless



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks during a media briefing on coronavirus in Downing Street, London, Monday, July 5, 2021. Johnson on Monday confirmed plans to lift mask requirements and social distancing rules as planned on July 19 despite a surge in infections. Credit: Daniel Leal-Olivas/Pool Photo via AP

Britain plans to scrap laws requiring face masks and social distancing later this month, Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed Monday, even as he acknowledged that lifting the restrictions will drive surging coronavirus cases higher.

Johnson said legal controls will be replaced by "personal responsibility" when the country moves to the final stage of its lockdown-lifting roadmap. That's scheduled to happen on July 19, though Johnson said a final decision would come on July 12.

The change will mean people can throw away masks after months of enforced face-covering, though they will still be recommended in some enclosed spaces such as public transport.

The removal of social distancing rules will allow nightclubs to reopen for the first time in 16 months, and people to once again order drinks at the bar in a pub. No longer will customers have to scan a phone app to provide their contact details when entering a venue.

The government will also stop instructing people to work from home if they can, leaving employers free to bring staff back to offices.

Britain has recorded more than 128,000 coronavirus deaths, the second-highest toll in Europe after Russia, and infections are rising due to the highly transmissible delta variant, which was first found in India. Confirmed cases have shot up from about 2,000 a day earlier this year to 25,000 a day in the past week. But the number of deaths is broadly stable, at fewer than 20 a day.

Public health officials say Britain's vaccination program has weakened the link between infections and deaths, though not severed it. So far, 86% of U.K. adults have received at least one vaccine dose and 64% are fully vaccinated. The government aims to give everyone over 18 both

shots by mid-September.

Johnson said Britain would have to "learn to live with this virus"—a major shift in tone from a leader who has previously painted COVID-19 as an enemy to be vanquished.

"I want to stress from the outset that this pandemic is far from over," he said Monday, predicting that cases could hit 50,000 a day by July 19. "We must reconcile ourselves, sadly, to more deaths from COVID."

But, he said, "if we can't reopen our society in the next few weeks, when we will be helped by the arrival of summer and by the school holidays, then we must ask ourselves 'when will we be able to return to normal?'"

That message was welcomed by lockdown-skeptic lawmakers in Johnson's governing Conservative Party, who say the economic and social damage of such long-lasting virus restrictions outweighs the public health benefits, and Britain's populist press, which have dubbed July 19 "freedom day."

Performing arts and hospitality businesses also welcomed the announcement. Mark Davyd, chief executive of the Music Venue Trust, tweeted: "I feel oddly numb, like I almost can't believe it. Lots of work to do, but we might actually have made it through."

But public health officials and scientists urged caution, saying ditching masks and social distancing altogether could be dangerous. Psychologist Stephen Reicher, a member of the government's scientific advisory committee, said "proportionate mitigations" against the spread of the virus, such as masks in crowded places, should stay in place.

Johnson said he would "obviously wear a mask in crowded places ... simply as a matter of personal courtesy."

The British government, which enforced one of the longest lockdowns in the world, has lifted restrictions for England in a series of steps that began with reopening schools in March. The fourth and final stage was delayed last month to provide time for more people to be vaccinated amid the rapid spread of the delta variant.

The changes announced by Johnson apply in England. Other parts of the U.K.—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—are following their own, broadly similar, roadmaps out of lockdown.

Keir Starmer, leader of the opposition Labour Party, said the government was being "reckless."

"A balanced approach, a proper plan, would say keep key protections," he said. "One of them would be masks in enclosed places and on public transport—that's a commonsense position. More ventilation, that's happening in other countries, is absolutely essential and proper payments for those that need to self-isolate."

Paul Hunter, professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia, said it made sense to ease restrictions in the summer, when schools are closed, people spend more time outdoors and other respiratory infections are at a low level.

"The disease burden associated with a larger peak during the summer would likely be less than one during the winter," Hunter said.

But Richard Tedder, a virologist at Imperial College London, said easing up while infections are still rampant "comes with the very real risk of facilitating the escape of variants which will be even more resistant to vaccines and potentially more infectious.

"Failing to recognize this is playing with fire," he said.

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