

# Turkey lifts most pandemic restrictions as new cases plateau

July 1 2021, by Mehmet Guzel and Zeynep Bilginsoy

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People walk on Istiklal Street, the main shopping street in Istanbul, Thursday, July 1, 2021. Turkey's government on Thursday eased restrictions in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and have reopened theaters, cinemas and other entertainment centers. Credit: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel

Men are playing cards and backgammon at their local coffeehouses

again, movie theaters are being cleaned before their first evening screening and bars are serving beer and chips in Istanbul's famous pedestrian avenue.

Turkey has eased nearly all pandemic restrictions on businesses and events starting Thursday, and lifted nighttime and Sunday curfews as new infections remain steadily below recent record high levels.

"We no longer have the patience to stay at home in both the financial and the spiritual way," 42-year-old gig worker Fatih Aydin said.

An interior ministry circular said restaurants, which re-opened weeks ago, and wedding parties no longer have to limit the number of guests but must still abide by social distancing rules. Only hookah shops are still closed.

Concerts and festivals can go ahead indoors and outdoors but music must end by midnight even though there is no longer a curfew. Restrictions on [public transport](#) with passenger and age limits have also been curtailed.

Turkey's mask mandate outdoors and in public places remains, though, like elsewhere, many people are not using masks correctly. "We are sick of this masked life, I think we need to get back to normal life," Huseyin Baytas, 24, said.

Although this was the most extensive relaxation of measures since the beginning of the pandemic, the threat remains. Turkey has been gradually easing restrictions since mid-May after the end of a so-called "full lockdown" from which millions of workers and tourists were exempt. A partial lockdown in mid-April was extended to a nearly three-week stay-at-home order after daily cases hit a record high of more than 63,000.



People play cards in a coffee shop in Istanbul, Thave fun in a restaurant in Istanbul, Thursday, July 1, 2021. Turkey's government on Thursday eased restrictions in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and have reopened theaters, cinemas and other entertainment centers. Credit: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel





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People have fun in a restaurant in Istanbul, Thursday, July 1, 2021. Turkey's government on Thursday eased restrictions in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and have reopened theaters, cinemas and other entertainment centers. Credit: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel





Cleaning staff prepare a movie theater for reopening after several months shut as part of the measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus, in Istanbul, Thursday, July 1, 2021. Turkey's government on Thursday eased restrictions in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and have reopened theaters, cinemas and other entertainment centers. Credit: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel



People sit in a restaurant in Istanbul, Thursday, July 1, 2021. Turkey's government on Thursday eased restrictions in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and have reopened theaters, cinemas and other entertainment centers. Credit: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel





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Mannequins that were used to be placed on tables to ensure social distancing to help curb the spread the coronavirus, are pictured in a restaurant in Istanbul, Thursday, July 1, 2021. Turkey's government on Thursday eased restrictions in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and have reopened theaters, cinemas and other entertainment centers. Credit: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel



A woman takes pictures in Istanbul, Thursday, July 1, 2021. Turkey's government on Thursday eased restrictions in place to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and have reopened theaters, cinemas and other entertainment centers. Credit: AP Photo/Emrah Gurel





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Infections and deaths have dropped since then but cases have been hovering around a 7-day average of about 5,500 per day. Turkey's vaccination drive has also gathered speed, surpassing 50 million doses administered as of Thursday. But only 18% of Turkey's nearly 84 million population has been fully vaccinated with shots by Pfizer-BioNTech and China's Sinovac.

As thousands of tourists come to Turkey's shores from Russia, where

there's been an infection surge, fears of the highly-infectious delta coronavirus variant first identified in India abound. Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said this week that 224 cases of the variant had been identified so far.

On Wednesday, Koca reduced the waiting time between two vaccine doses to four weeks. He also announced that health-care workers and people aged over 50 could choose to get a third dose—amid worries on Sinovac's long-term efficacy, especially in dealing with the delta variant.

Deniz Seckin, a 40-year-old engineer, said she's not ready to drop precautions. "The danger is not 100% over. I've only had my first dose of the vaccine. There is the delta variant and infection numbers are not dropping below 5,000."

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Citation: Turkey lifts most pandemic restrictions as new cases plateau (2021, July 1) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-07-turkey-pandemic-restrictions-cases-plateau.html>

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