New restrictions in Finland as COVID cases hit record

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Limits on public gatherings will be tightened in the Finnish capital as the country's infection rates hit a new daily high, health chiefs said on Thursday.

Despite enjoying some of Europe's lowest incidence rates during much

of the pandemic, cases in Finland have been surging in recent weeks, with a record 1,024 new infections on Wednesday, public health agency THL said.

The Nordic nation of 5.5 million has so far recorded over 115,000 infections and 995 COVID-related deaths, with the Delta variant behind 90 percent of new infections, THL said.

"In a situation where vaccine coverage is still incomplete and many people have only had one dose or none at all, the risk of serious infection is still there," health ministry official Pasi Pohjola told a press conference.

"That is why restrictions are continuing."

As of 20 August, indoor events will be limited to 25 people and outdoor gatherings to 50 in Helsinki and the surrounding areas, southern Finland's regional administrative agency announced on Thursday.

Finland's vaccination drive currently lags behind many other EU states, with only 40 percent of the population fully vaccinated, in part because officials decided on a longer, three-month gap between doses to prioritise giving a first jab to as many as possible.

New cases were overwhelmingly among younger, unvaccinated people, the THL said, and added that although hospitalisations are down compared to previous waves, "the burden on healthcare services remains difficult."

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