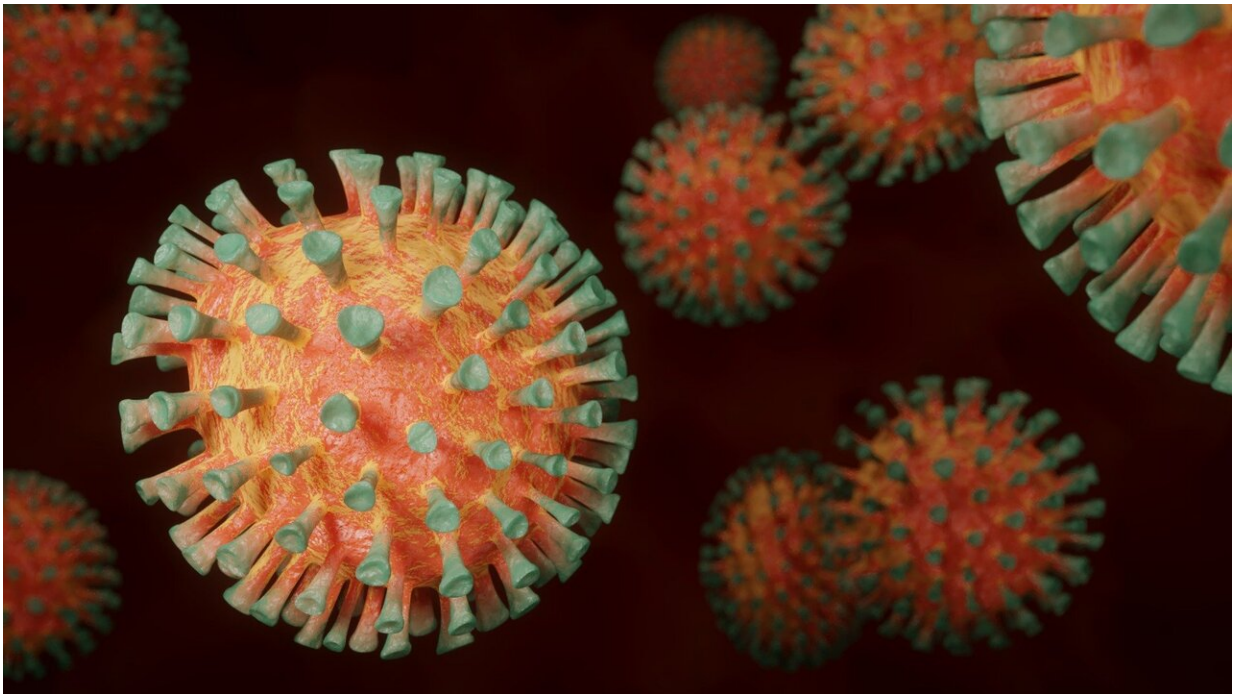


Russia reports record virus deaths for second day in a row

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Russia on Friday recorded its highest daily coronavirus death toll for a second day running, even as the country's outbreak epicentre Moscow lifted some restrictions.

A government tally showed 815 COVID-19 fatalities over the past 24 hours and 22,277 new cases.

Russia, the fourth worst-hit country in the world in terms of cases, has since mid-June been hit by a new wave of infections driven by the highly transmissible Delta variant.

The new figures bring Russia's total fatalities from COVID-19 to 168,864—the highest toll in Europe.

This figure, however, only takes into account deaths where the virus was established as the primary cause of death after a post-mortem.

Under a broader definition for deaths linked to the coronavirus, statistics agency Rosstat said that Russia has seen more than 300,000 fatalities as of the end of June.

And on Friday, Moscow's health department reported that the city saw 6,583 deaths from the virus in July, making it the capital's deadliest month since the start of the pandemic.

Sluggish vaccination drive

Authorities have faced a vaccine-sceptic population, with a poll by the independent Levada Centre this week showing that 55 percent of Russians do not plan to get jabbed.

Moscow as well as a host of regions have introduced mandatory vaccination measures to speed up the country's inoculation drive, and President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly called on Russians to get vaccinated.

"It's of course not good that the deaths are rising so quickly. I hope that people will get vaccinated faster," Nikita, a bank worker in Moscow, told AFP.

While Russia has three homegrown vaccines available to the population, it does not distribute any Western-made jabs.

As of Friday, just over 30 million of Russia's around 146 million people had been fully vaccinated, according to the Gogov website, which tallies COVID data from the regions.

Moscow on Friday proceeded with easing virus restrictions, mayor Sergei Sobyenin lifting a requirement for employers to keep at least 30 percent of employees working from home.

Sobyenin said on his website that the pandemic "continues to retreat" and the number of new hospitalisations in the capital has more than halved when compared to mid-June.

Neighbouring Georgia, a former Soviet republic in the Caucasus, meanwhile tightened restrictions this week as new infections surged.

The measures announced on Thursday include the suspension of public transport within Georgian cities and a ban on mass gatherings such as festivals, concerts and sporting events.

The restrictions will be in place from August 14 until September 4.

"The epidemic situation in the country is hard and we expect the new regulations to stabilise the spread of the infection in two weeks," Georgia's Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze said Friday.

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