

Tokyo opens oxygen station for COVID patients as cases surge

August 23 2021, by Mari Yamaguchi



People wearing face masks to help protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk along a street in Tokyo Monday, Aug. 23, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

Japan on Monday opened a temporary facility in Tokyo to provide

oxygen for up to 130 coronavirus patients with mild symptoms, as the capital's health care system grows severely strained.

The so-called "oxygen station" in Tokyo's Shibuya district is aimed at people who develop a problem while isolating at home or waiting for hospital vacancies, and is staffed by three doctors and 25 nurses.

The idea is to temporarily treat mild cases with supplementary oxygen amid growing concerns that people may get sicker—and possibly start dying at home—in the absence of medical attention.

Tokyo has been under emergency measures for the majority of the year, most recently since July 12. But new daily cases have increased more than tenfold since then to about 5,000 in Tokyo and 25,000 nationwide, quickly filling up hospital beds and forcing many people to recover at home, some of whom require supplemental oxygen.

As of Monday, nearly 40,000 patients in Tokyo are recovering at home or in hotels, compared to about 4,000 hospitalizations. A growing number of patients spend hours on ambulances trying to find hospitals. Around 15,600 people have died since the pandemic began.

Although Japan has far fewer cases than many other countries, the wealthy nation's pandemic response is near collapse. Only a small percentage of hospitals are taking virus patients, either for financial reasons or because they lack the capability to treat infectious diseases, experts say.



People wearing face masks to help protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk on a street in Tokyo Monday, Aug. 23, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

The Tokyo metropolitan government plans to add 110 more beds with oxygen at prefectural-run hospitals by the end of August, while also preparing to set up makeshift hospitals that can provide antibody cocktail infusions for those in the early stages of infection, officials said.

But experts say oxygen only provides temporary relief and that the government should quickly build a makeshift COVID-19 hospital.



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Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government faced criticism for insisting on holding the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics despite strong opposition from the public amid the rising infections led by the more infectious delta variant.

On Friday, Japan expanded emergency measures to two-thirds of the country until Sept. 12 and is considering adding more areas.



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On Monday, Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike and Health Minister Norihisa Tamura met and jointly issued a firm request to all hospitals in the Japanese capital to take in as many patients as possible, or dispatch medical workers to assist at temporary oxygen stations or other facilities.

Koike urged Tokyo hospitals to consider postponing non-urgent surgical operations or curtailing ordinary treatment "to maximize hospitalization." Tamura said there's limited capacity for those in serious condition nationwide. "We need everyone's help to overcome this difficult situation," Tamura said.

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