

Italy targets unvaccinated with restrictions as cases rise

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Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi holds a press conference after the Council of Ministers in Rome Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2021. The Italian government on Wednesday decided to exclude unvaccinated people from certain activities over the holidays in a bid to contain rising coronavirus infections and stave off financially crippling lockdowns just as the economy is starting to grow again. A new government decree also makes vaccinations, including booster shots, mandatory for law enforcement, military and all school employees. Previously, vaccines were only required for health care workers and teachers. Credit: Fabio

Frustaci/LaPresse pool via AP

The Italian government on Wednesday decided to exclude unvaccinated people from certain leisure activities in a bid to contain rising coronavirus infections and stave off financially crippling lockdowns just as the economy is starting to grow again.

Starting Dec. 6, only people with proof of vaccination or of having recovered from COVID-19 can eat at indoor restaurants, and go to the movies or sporting events, excluding the ability to access such venues with just a negative test.

A new government decree also made vaccinations mandatory for law enforcement, military and all school employees, among others. Previously, vaccines were only required for health care workers and anyone who worked in eldercare homes.

Premier Mario Draghi said the measures were necessary to prevent the "slow but steady" increase in infections from growing while preserving the gains Italy has made in rebooting the European Union's third-largest economy, which shrank 8.9% last year.

The concern is particularly acute given the upcoming holiday tourism season and the winter wave of infections. Regional officials in the north, for example, are desperate for Italy's ski industry, which in normal times generates 1.2 billion euros (\$1.5 billion) in annual revenues and employs 5,000 permanent and 10,000 seasonal workers, to remain open after losing two seasons to COVID-19.

"We've begun to return to normality. We want to conserve this normality," Draghi told a press conference after the Cabinet

unanimously approved the measures.

Italy, where Europe's outbreak began in February 2020, is seeing a rise in infections but to a more measured degree than other EU countries, recording around 10,000 new cases and fewer than 100 deaths a day.

It has fully vaccinated more than 84% of its over-12 population, but first-dose appointments have leveled off and 20 small towns in northern Italy where vaccination rates are among the lowest in the country went into semi-lockdown on Wednesday because infections there were rising fast.

The aim of the new measures is to prevent such blanket lockdowns—an 8 p.m.-5 a.m. curfew and closure of bars and restaurants at 6 p.m.—from returning across the board. The new decree would allow restaurants and other venues to remain open even when cases rise and hospitals fill up, but only to those with proof of vaccination or of having recovered from COVID-19.

Unlike other countries, Italy never relaxed many of its restrictions even as cases tanked with the vaccine: Indoor mask mandates remain in place and Italy last month became the first country in the West to require a health pass to access the workplace.

The so-called "Green Pass" contained proof of vaccination, of being cured of COVID-19 or a negative test. With the new decree, the government is introducing a "reinforced" Green Pass that excludes the ability to test into certain indoor activities.

Non-vaccinated people, for example, won't be able to go to the movies or theater or eat indoors from Dec. 6-Jan. 15, or beyond that date in regions where infection and hospital admission rates are rising.

The decree also added activities for which even a basic Green Pass is

needed, including to check into a hotel or use regional or local public transport. Previously, a Green Pass was necessary only for long-distance public transport.

The decree calls on local authorities to devise beefed-up controls, and report weekly to the Interior Ministry on how they're going to enforce the new measures.

Health Minister Roberto Speranza acknowledged Italy was doing better than many of its neighbors, but said the country had learned that the key to fighting the pandemic was with preventive and proactive measures.

"Staying in front of the virus is fundamental if you want to keep the situation under control," he said.

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