

South Korea pushes booster shots as COVID-19 spread worsens

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South Korea on Wednesday reported 3,187 new cases of the coronavirus, nearly matching a one-day record set in September, a worrisome development in a country that eased social distancing rules in recent weeks to lessen the pandemic's economic impact.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said more than 2,550 of the new cases came from the greater capital area, including a record 1,436 in Seoul. The country's death toll is now 3,137, after 21 deaths were reported on Wednesday, the 16th consecutive day of double-digit fatalities, including a record 32 on Saturday.

The delta-driven spread has raised questions about whether the country was too quick to ease pandemic restrictions at the start of November in what officials described as a first step toward restoring some pre-pandemic normalcy.

In allowing larger social gatherings and expanding indoor dining hours at restaurants, officials had hoped that the country's improving vaccination rates would keep hospitalizations and deaths down even if the virus continues to spread.

But there has been a rise in serious cases and fatalities among senior citizens who rejected vaccines or people in long-term care settings whose immunities have waned after being inoculated early in the vaccine rollout, which began in late February.

Officials are now pushing to speed up the administration of booster shots for people who were fully vaccinated more than six months ago. Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, the No. 2 government official behind President Moon Jae-in, said during a virus meeting Wednesday that the interval will be reduced to four months for people who are in their 60s or older, and for patients in nursing homes or long-term care hospitals. People in their 50s will be eligible for booster shots after five months, Kim said.

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