

UK official warns of hard months ahead amid high COVID rates

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England's deputy chief medical officer said Wednesday that too many people believe the pandemic is over, warning that the U.K.'s very high coronavirus rates and rising deaths mean that there are "hard months to come in the winter."

Jonathan Van-Tam also said he was worried that increasing numbers of deaths showed infections were "now starting to penetrate into older age groups."

Coronavirus "rates are still very high at the moment. They are higher than in most of Europe," Van-Tam told the BBC. "We are running quite hot. And, of course, it's of concern to scientists that we are running this hot this early in the autumn season."

"I personally feel there are some hard months to come in the winter and it's not over," he added.

The British government reported 41,299 new COVID-19 cases and 217 deaths Wednesday. The country recorded its highest daily death toll since February - 293 - on Tuesday.

While new cases have been dropping from around 46,000 a day in October, infection rates in Britain are still much higher than in most of Europe.

Van-Tam said the drop in case numbers mainly reflected the ebbing of a surge recently seen among teenagers. He warned that while hospital admissions have plateaued and total numbers of patients in hospitals have slightly gone down, the overall picture was still worrying.

"This could be a pause before things go up, it could be the very first signs that things are beginning to stabilize but at a high rate," he said. "But my worry is that the deaths are increasing and that shows that the infection is now starting to penetrate into those older age groups."

The U.K. got a head-start in rolling out its vaccination program, and most adults have been fully inoculated. A booster shot is being offered to millions, including everyone over 50. But the government has been

cautious about vaccinating teenagers and younger people, authorizing jabs for healthy children between 12 to 15 years old only this September.

Jeremy Brown, a member of the government's vaccination advisory committee, said it was "far too early" to follow the lead of the United States in vaccinating children 11 years old and under.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government lifted almost all coronavirus restrictions in July, including mandatory face coverings and social distancing requirements. Nightclubs and crowded venues were allowed to fully open and the work from home advice was scrapped.

Authorities have resisted calls to reimpose restrictions like mandatory mask-wearing, and are instead relying heavily on vaccines to keep infections down.

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