

British surge seen as warning on omicron but responses vary

December 16 2021, by Danica Kirka and Mike Corder



A woman wears a face mask as she walks in Covent Garden market, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Spiraling infections in Britain driven in part by the new omicron variant of the coronavirus rattled many in Europe on Thursday, fueling a familiar dread that tighter restrictions will scuttle holiday plans again this year.

Much remains unknown about omicron, but increasingly officials are warning that at the very least it appears more transmissible than the delta variant, which was already putting pressure on hospitals from the United States to the Netherlands. With so many questions outstanding, uncertainty reigned over how quickly and how severely to crack down on Christmas travel and end-of-year parties.

After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before.

In England, the chief medical officer urged people to limit who they see in the festive period—and pubs and restaurants said many were heeding that advice by canceling Christmas parties, though there has been much debate about what's OK to do right now. In the U.S., meanwhile, the White House insisted [there was no need for a lockdown](#), despite signs that omicron was gaining ground there.



People queue outside the vaccination centre at St Thomas' Hospital, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Globally, more than 75 countries have reported confirmed cases of the new variant. In Britain, where omicron cases are doubling every two to three days, the variant is expected to soon replace delta as the dominant strain in the country—and the government has accelerated its booster program in response. Authorities in the 27-nation European Union say omicron will [be the dominant variant in the bloc by mid-January.](#)

In addition to hints that it's more contagious, early data suggest omicron may be milder but better at evading vaccines—making booster shots more crucial. Experts have urged caution in particular on drawing conclusions about how mild it is because hospitalizations lag behind infections and so many variables contribute to how sick people get.

Also, even if omicron proves milder on the whole than delta, it may disarm some of the lifesaving tools available and put immune-compromised and elderly people at particular risk. And if it's more transmissible, more infections overall raise the risk that more cases will be serious.

While experts gather the data, some governments rushed to act, while others sought to calm fears that the new variant would land countries back on square one.



A man wears a face mask as he reads a newspaper on a London Underground train, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted Thursday that the situation in the U.K. is different from last year because of the widespread use of vaccines and the ability to test.

He said that if people want to attend an event "the sensible thing to do is to get a test and to make sure that you're being cautious."

"But we're not saying that we want to cancel stuff, we're not locking stuff down, and the fastest route back to normality is to get boosted," he said.

Professor Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, however, struck a more cautious note, advising people earlier in the week to limit their social contacts.

On Thursday, he told a parliamentary committee hearing that the government could have to review measures if vaccines prove less effective than expected against omicron.

He said that "would be a material change to how ministers viewed the risks going forward."



A woman wears a face mask as she sits on a bus, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Among those taking the more cautious route was Queen Elizabeth II, who opted to cancel her traditional pre-Christmas family lunch as cases soared.

The Netherlands, meanwhile, has been in a partial lockdown since

November to curb a delta-driven surge and while infection numbers are declining now the government this week ordered elementary schools to close for Christmas a week early amid fears omicron will fuel a new rise. Authorities also sped up a vaccination booster campaign as caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte cited Britain as an example of how swiftly the variant can spread.

[EU leaders gathering in Brussels](#) for a summit Thursday sought to balance tackling the surge of infections across the continent while keeping borders open with common policies throughout the bloc.

"Let's try to maintain the European solution," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said. "If every country goes it alone again we'll be even further from home."



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, second right, speaks with Czech Republic's Prime Minister Andrej Babis, second left, during a round table meeting at an EU Summit in Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. European Union leaders meet for a one-day summit Thursday that will center on Russia's military threat to neighbouring Ukraine and on ways to deal with the continuing COVID-19 crisis. Credit: Olivier Hoslet, Pool Photo via AP

But ahead of the meeting, European nations already were acting to rein in the spread of the virus. Greece and Italy tightened entry requirements for travelers earlier this week, and Portugal decided to keep stricter border controls in place beyond their planned Jan. 9 end.

On Thursday, France said it will slap restrictions on travelers arriving from the U.K.—which is no longer part of the EU—putting limits on reasons for traveling and requiring 48-hour isolation upon arrival. The new measures will take effect first thing Saturday.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex said the measures are being imposed "in the face of the extremely rapid spread of the omicron variant in the U.K."

The abrupt move comes after weeks of political tensions between France and Britain over fishing rights and how to deal with migration across the English Channel. It also comes as France's government is desperately trying to avoid a new lockdown that would hurt the economy and cloud President Emmanuel Macron's expected reelection campaign.



A woman wears a face shield as she walks past an image of Santa Claus at a Christmas market, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali



People, some wearing masks, queue to get tested, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali



A face mask on the ground in Westminster, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Waiting outside a Paris train station, Constantin Dobrynin said that he sometimes felt governments over-reacted and imposed unnecessary measures. As for omicron, it wasn't yet clear how serious it would be.

"So we should be balanced, and we shouldn't be panicked," he said.

Britain said it was not planning reciprocal measures.

Fearing a raft of canceled parties and a general drop in business at the height of the crucial and lucrative Christmas season, British restaurants and pubs demanded government help Thursday. They said concerns about the new variant have already wiped out 2 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) in sales over the last 10 days.

Across London, restaurants which would normally see bustling crowds clinking glasses and tucking into festive meals were reporting droves of cancellations and empty rooms.

"It's a complete nightmare.... This week should be the busiest week of the year for hospitality," said Sally Abé, a chef at the Conrad Hotel in central London. "It's everywhere, everybody's canceling, but there's no support from the government."

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