

Britons rush to get shots in booster blitz against omicron

December 13 2021, by Jill Lawless and Danica Kirka



People queue on Westminster Bridge for booster jabs at St Thomas' Hospital, London, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Credit: Kirsty O'Connor/PA via AP

Long lines formed Monday at vaccination centers across England as people heeded the government's call for all adults to get booster shots to protect themselves against the omicron variant, as the U.K. recorded its first death of a patient infected with omicron.

In a televised announcement late Sunday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said [everyone 18 and up](#) would be offered a third vaccine dose by Dec. 31—less than three weeks away, and a month earlier than the previous target.

Johnson said said boosters would "reinforce our wall of vaccine protection" against an anticipated "tidal wave of omicron." U.K. health authorities say omicron cases are doubling every two to three days in Britain, and it will replace delta as the dominant coronavirus strain within days.

The British government raised the country's coronavirus threat level on Sunday, warning that the rapid spread of omicron "adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and health care services."

Scientists in South Africa, where omicron was first identified, say they the variant may cause less severe disease than delta but caution that it's too soon to be certain. Health authorities around the world are watching Britain closely to see what an omicron surge looks like in a country with an older, more highly vaccinated population than South Africa's.



People queue for booster jabs at Sevenoaks Pharmacy in Sevenoaks, England, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson says that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and he has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Credit: Gareth Fuller/PA via AP

About 10 people are in U.K. hospitals with omicron, and Johnson on Monday reported the country's first COVID-19 omicron death.

"The idea that this is somehow a milder version of the virus, I think that's something we need to set on one side and just recognize the sheer pace at which it accelerates through the population," Johnson said as he visited a vaccination center in London. "So the best thing we can do is all get our boosters."

The U.K. Health Security Agency says existing vaccines appear less effective in preventing symptomatic infections in people exposed to omicron, though effectiveness appears to rise to between 70% and 75% after a third dose.

More than 80% of people age 12 and up in Britain have received two vaccine doses, and 40% of adults have had three. Giving the rest of adults boosters by the end of the month will be a huge challenge, requiring almost 1 million vaccine shots a day. Johnson acknowledged that many routine medical procedures would have to be postponed to meet the goal.



People queue for booster jabs at St Thomas Hospital, London, Monday Dec. 13, 2021. Prime Minister Boris Johnson says that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and he has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Johnson said in a televised statement Sunday that everyone age 18 and older will be offered a third shot of vaccine by the end of this month. Credit: David Hughes/PA via AP

Some 750 soldiers and thousands of volunteer vaccinators will help give the jabs at doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies and pop-up vaccination centers.

While the online booster appointment system will not be open to under-30s until Wednesday, Johnson said any adult could show up at a walk-in center to get a booster starting Monday.

That caused a rush at big London vaccination clinics on Monday morning. The line for shots at St. Thomas' Hospital, on the south bank of the River Thames in London, stretched across Westminster Bridge toward Parliament. At many clinics, people queued patiently despite being told they faced a wait of several hours.

At the Gordon Hospital walk-in clinic in central London, most of those lining up were in their 20s and 30s.

"It's only an hour and I can get a boost," said Sam Collins, 30. "It's a fair bit of time, but I've seen loads of other clinics on social media and things which have far longer queues."



Few commuters are seen at Paddington Underground Station in London, early Monday, Dec. 13, 2021 as concerns about the new COVID-19 variant led British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government to reintroduce restrictions including people being urged to work from home. The British government raised the country's official coronavirus threat level on Sunday, warning the rapid spread of the omicron variant had pushed the U.K. into risky territory. Credit: Peter Clifton/PA via AP

He said he was "not especially" worried about omicron, "but I'd just prefer to be triple vaxxed. Also my partner has just had a baby and she's not vaccinated, so if I can be extra vaccinated, then that will help."

The government's appointment-booking website struggled to keep up with demand, and also ran out of rapid at-home virus test kits, which have been distributed free to households during the pandemic. Starting Wednesday, people in England must show proof of vaccination or a negative test to enter nightclubs and other crowded venues.

Johnson's Dec. 31 target applies to England. The other parts of the U.K.—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—are also expected to speed up their vaccination campaigns.

While omicron is spreading around the world, Britain may be especially affected because it ordinarily has high levels of travel to South Africa. The omicron outbreak is also more visible in Britain because U.K. is also a world leader in genomic sequencing, the technique used to identify and track new variants.



People queue at a vaccination centre in London, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson says that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and he has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Credit: AP Photo/Frank Augstein

Researchers in the U.K. have sequenced about 13.3% of all positive cases, compared with 3.8% in the U.S., according to GISAID, which promotes rapid sharing of data on COVID-19 and the flu. While Iceland and Denmark have sequenced a greater percentage of their positive cases, the size of the U.K.'s population and the scope of its outbreak mean that Britain has sequenced many more cases.

This surveillance provided key evidence that Johnson and his chief medical officers used in deciding to tighten pandemic restrictions and ramp up the U.K.'s vaccination program.

Johnson's Conservative government is requiring vaccine certificates to enter nightclubs and reintroducing restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must be worn again in most indoor settings and as of Monday, people were urged to work from home if possible.



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People queue outside a vaccination center in Manchester, England, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and he has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Super



People queue outside a vaccination center in Manchester, England, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and he has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Super



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British Prime Minister Boris Johnson visits Stow Health Vaccination center, in Westminster, London, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. Johnson says that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and he has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Credit: Jeremy Selwyn/Pool Photo via AP



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson visits Stow Health Vaccination center, in Westminster, London, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. Johnson says that Britain faces a "tidal wave" of infections from the omicron coronavirus variant and he has announced a huge increase in booster vaccinations to strengthen defenses against it. Credit: Jeremy Selwyn/Pool Photo via AP



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People queue for coronavirus booster jabs at St Thomas' Hospital, with the National COVID Memorial Wall in the foreground, in London, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. Long lines formed at vaccination centers in Britain as people heeded the government's call for all adults to get booster shots to protect against the omicron variant of the coronavirus, which the prime minister said Monday has caused at least one death. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

Many scientists say those measures are unlikely to be enough and are calling for tougher ones. But cafes, pubs and shops in city centers fear that plummeting numbers of commuters will hammer their businesses in the usually busy pre-Christmas period.

Johnson is facing a major rebellion from unhappy Conservative lawmakers when Parliament votes on the new virus restrictions Tuesday.

Dozens are expected to oppose the restrictions—especially vaccine passports, which they say are unfair and economically damaging.

The measures are still highly likely to pass with support from the opposition Labour Party.

Robert Read, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Southampton, said it was still unclear how severe cases of COVID-19 from omicron would be but "the evidence is that omicron probably requires much larger amounts of antibody in the blood in order to thwart the virus as much as possible."

"We need to get those third doses into as many adults as we possibly can, just in case this virus turns out to be a raging bull rather than a pussy cat," Read told radio station LBC.

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