

Finland to vaccinate children aged five to 12

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Finland will expand its vaccination programme to include children aged five to 12 as the country faces record COVID infections, health officials said on Wednesday.

"I'm expecting that vaccinations can start immediately after Christmas," senior health ministry official Taneli Puumalainen told a press conference.

Until now only children in vulnerable groups of that age have been eligible for the jab.

The measure comes alongside new restrictions to curb Christmas drinking and tighten [border controls](#) agreed by the governing coalition

late on Tuesday.

"We are buying more time to make sure Omicron does not pose a serious national threat," minister Krista Kiuru told the press conference.

Bars in Finland will stop serving alcohol at 9:00 pm on Christmas Eve. A three-week alcohol sales ban past 5:00 pm will then apply to bars and restaurants from December 28.

Regional authorities will be advised to ban large gatherings such as [sporting events](#) and concerts with unallocated seating, while universities will be advised to move to distance teaching.

Meanwhile EU citizens arriving at the Finnish border will be required to show a negative COVID test even if vaccinated, in an extension of a policy which previously only applied to non-EU and high-risk areas.

Finland has maintained some of Europe's lowest incidence rates throughout the pandemic, but the country of 5.5 million is now facing record infection levels, with more than 23,000 new coronavirus cases in the past two weeks.

Speaking on Tuesday night, Prime Minister Sanna Marin said the government will begin preparing a support package to compensate hospitality businesses affected by the restrictions.

"We must take this situation seriously and react accordingly," Marin said.

In recent weeks Finland has experienced a sharp rise in new infections, with health authorities registering a total of 221,292 COVID cases.

Yet the country's tally of 1,495 COVID-related deaths equates to one of

the lowest fatality rates in Europe.

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