

France fears over 100,000 daily Covid cases by year end

December 22 2021



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The number of daily COVID-19 cases in France is set to exceed 100,000 by the end of December due to the faster-spreading Omicron variant, Health Minister Olivier Veran said Wednesday.

"This is what the modelling is showing," he told BFM-TV in an interview, also announcing that France would from Wednesday open vaccinations to five- to 11-year-olds for the first time.

France recorded almost 73,000 new infections on Tuesday, with an average of over 54,000 over the last seven days. But officials fear that the emergence of Omicron has changed the nature of the pandemic.

Veran said that Omicron cases accounted for 20 percent of new infections in France but up to 35 percent in the Paris region.

He said the variant was expected to account for the majority of new cases between Christmas and the New Year.

"There is one certainty. Omicron is very contagious, it will spread, and no country will be spared," said Veran, emphasising that vaccines did have an effect on the variant.

President Emmanuel Macron is keeping a close eye on the spread of Omicron, with his handling of the pandemic set to be a crucial issue in 2022 presidential elections.

Unlike some European neighbours like the Netherlands, France has not re-imposed tough restrictions ahead of Christmas to slow its spread.

But the country has one of the strictest health pass systems in Europe, with proof of full vaccination, recovery or a recent test needed to enter catering and cultural establishments.

The government is now introducing legislation to tighten this further to transform the health pass into a vaccine pass, meaning it will only be valid with a full course of vaccination and not through testing or recovery.

Macron meanwhile promised that next year's presidential election would take place regardless of COVID.

He told Wednesday's cabinet meeting "very clearly" that "this country's elections dates will be kept", government spokesman Gabriel Attal told reporters.

Any suggestion to postpone the presidential vote in April was "neither on the table, nor under the table and not even in the cupboard next to the table", Attal said.

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Citation: France fears over 100,000 daily Covid cases by year end (2021, December 22)
retrieved 28 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-france-daily-covid-cases-year.html>

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