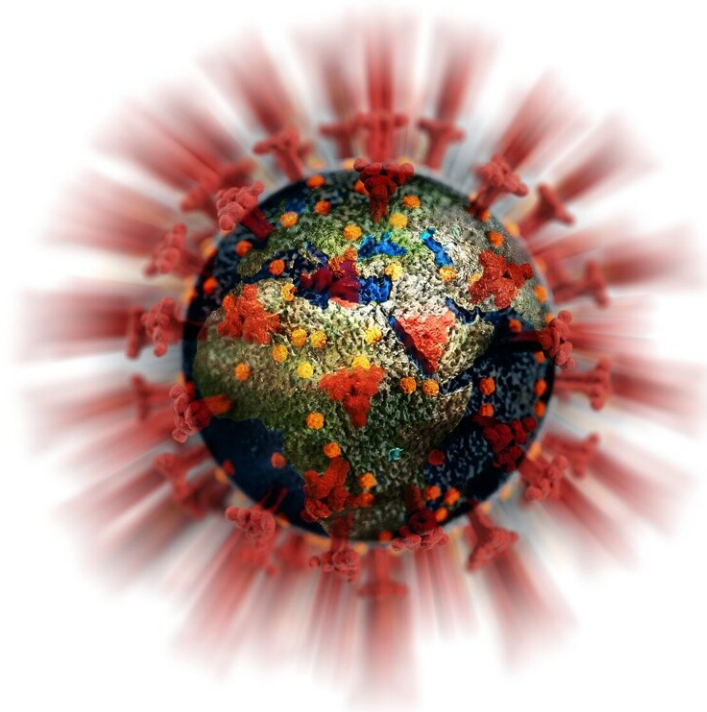


German govt advisory panel urges fresh measures to fight Omicron

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Fresh measures are urgently needed in Germany to fight the surge in the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, a government advisory group said Sunday.

The experts warned in a report of a growing risk that "critical infrastructure" such as hospitals, security, the health services and basic utilities could be disrupted if further steps are not taken.

"If the spread of the Omicron variant in Germany continues as it has, a significant part of the population will fall sick and/or will go into quarantine simultaneously," the report by the 19-member panel said.

The report did not raise the spectre of a new confinement but urged "strong reductions in contacts" within the populace in "the coming days".

Omicron has given a "new dimension" to the pandemic because it is "infecting many more people in a very short time and affects more of the recovered and the vaccinated", the experts said.

The variant could lead to an "explosive spread", with cases doubling within two to four days, the experts projected.

Earlier Sunday, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach ruled out a lockdown "before Christmas" such as that ordered in the Netherlands, and said it was unlikely after the holidays.

On Friday, Lauterbach said he was bracing for a "massive wave" of the Omicron variant.

The experts' report called for "complete and immediate preparation" to protect Germany's critical infrastructure.

It said "control mechanisms need to be available in the short term", while testing capacity and adequate supply chains must be ensured.

A number of restrictions are in place in Germany, notably affecting the unvaccinated who are barred from most public places.

A surge in infections of the Delta variant that started in early autumn has abated but between 30,000 and 50,000 new cases are recorded every 24 hours.

Around 70 percent of the German population are now fully vaccinated.

Germany restricts travel from UK

Meanwhile Germany's health authority announced late Saturday that Britain had been added to its list of COVID high-risk countries, which will mean tighter travel restrictions.

The decision is a response to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, which forced London's mayor Sadiq Khan to declare a "major incident" on Saturday in the British capital.

As a result of the change, enforceable from Sunday, arrivals from Britain must now observe a two-week quarantine regardless of whether they are vaccinated, said the country's health agency, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI).

The United Kingdom is now considered a "variant zone" of COVID-19, a category reserved for nations where the risk is the highest.

More than 65,000 new COVID cases were confirmed in London over the past seven days, with 26,418 cases reported in the last 24 hours—the highest number since the start of the pandemic.

Several other European countries, including France, have already taken steps to limit the entry of travellers from the United Kingdom.

German authorities have placed France and Denmark among the "high risk" contamination zones, a level below the UK.

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