

German leaders huddle to finalise emergency COVID plan

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Chancellor Merkel and her designated successor Scholz must tackle record Covid infections in Germany.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and her designated successor Olaf Scholz will

meet German regional leaders on Thursday to finalise new measures to tackle surging COVID cases, with compulsory jabs among the options on the table.

Infections have smashed records in Germany in recent weeks and hospitals are sounding the alarm, with many already over capacity and sending patients to other parts of the country for treatment.

Though the seven-day incidence rate has fallen slightly this week, it still stood at 442.9 new infections per 100,000 people on Wednesday, with 67,186 new cases recorded in the past 24 hours.

Merkel, Scholz and the leaders of Germany's 16 states tightened COVID restrictions just two weeks ago, but came together again on Tuesday to discuss tougher measures and are now expected to fine tune the plans.

After Tuesday's meeting, Scholz said he was in favour of compulsory vaccination for all Germans and wants parliament to vote on the matter before the end of the year.

"Too many people have not got vaccinated," he told Bild television. Making jabs compulsory is justified "to protect us all", he said.

Many experts have blamed Germany's surging fourth wave on its relatively low vaccination rate of around 68 percent, compared to fellow EU countries such as Spain on 79 percent and Portugal on 86 percent.

'Must move quickly'

Compulsory jabs should be in force "in the beginning of February or March so we must move quickly now," Scholz said, promising that lawmakers would be allowed to vote according to their conscience.

Merkel's outgoing government had always ruled out [mandatory vaccination](#), but the measure is now backed by politicians from across the spectrum.

Merkel's spokeswoman on Wednesday stopped short of endorsing the measure but said Germany was "in a dramatic situation in the pandemic where new possibilities have to be thought about".

In Berlin on Wednesday, a woman who gave her name as Clara said she disagreed with compulsory jabs in principle but also felt "we are already so deep in the pandemic that there is no way around it".

Fellow passer-by Alicia Muench said it "would have been a good idea from the beginning" and she was in favour of the move, "especially in certain professions, but also in general".

Germany already announced plans earlier this month to require health workers and soldiers to get inoculated against COVID-19.

Expanding that to the [general public](#) would see the country follow the example of neighbouring Austria, which is planning mandatory vaccinations from February.

Greece has announced mandatory jabs for over 60s, with [unvaccinated people](#) facing fines if they don't comply.

Curbs for unvaccinated

European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen said Wednesday it was time for the bloc to "think about mandatory vaccination" against COVID, though she also stressed it was up to individual states to make the decision.

"My personal position is... I think it is understandable and appropriate to lead this discussion now," she said.

Other measures up for discussion in Germany on Thursday include capping the number of people the unvaccinated can socialise with, closing nightclubs and limiting large events. Only the vaccinated and recovered would be allowed into non-essential shops, according to the plans.

Bavarian premier Markus Soeder has said he expects Bundesliga football games to return to playing to empty stands, following an outcry over a packed stadium in Cologne at the weekend.

Several hard-hit German regions have already cancelled Christmas markets and barred the unvaccinated from public spaces like gyms and leisure facilities to slow the pandemic spread.

But critics say the patchwork of rules is confusing, and this week's emergency talks are aimed at coming up with nationwide rules.

Thursday's meeting comes two days after the country's constitutional court ruled that sweeping measures imposed earlier in the pandemic—including curfews, school closures and contact restrictions—were lawful.

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