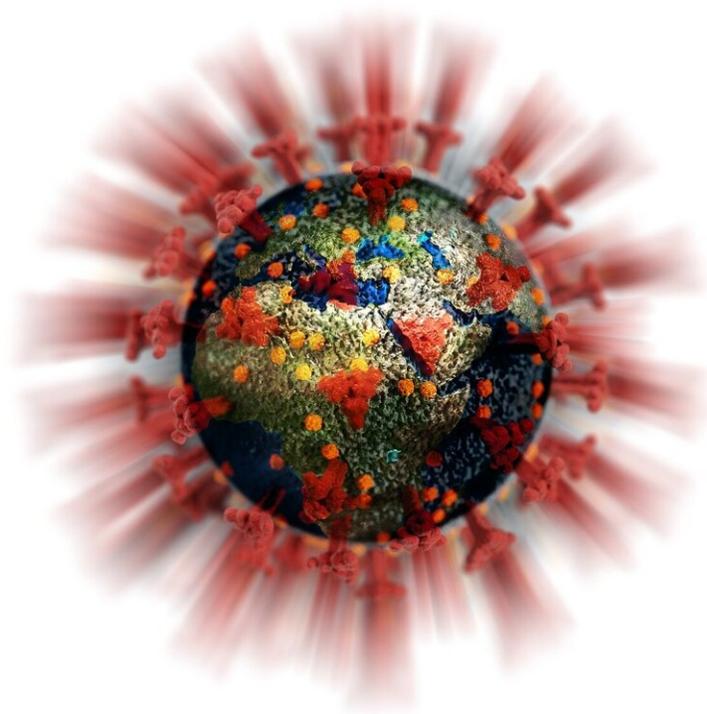


Germany sees omicron dominant soon, pushes on vaccination

December 22 2021



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The omicron variant could be dominant in Germany in one to three weeks, a senior official said Wednesday, while the health minister called for vaccination centers to be kept open over the Christmas holidays to

keep the country's booster campaign up to speed.

The European Union's most populous nation has seen about 540 confirmed and 1,848 suspected cases of COVID-19 infections with omicron so far, said Lothar Wieler, the head of the Robert Koch Institute. But he noted that those cases are one to two weeks old, because of the time need to report and sequence cases.

"The trend is crystal-clear," Wieler said. "With a doubling time (for cases) of about three days, the new variant could in the next one, two, at the latest three weeks already account for the majority of all infections in our country."

Omicron is already the dominant form of the coronavirus in England, Scotland and the United States. In Germany, a wave of infections caused by the still-dominant delta variant is receding slowly, but officials say the case level is still much too high.

Germany's federal and state governments agreed on Tuesday to introduce new restrictions by Dec. 28, limiting private gatherings to 10 people, shutting night clubs and removing spectators from major events.

Wieler called for caution before that. He said that Christmas "should not be the spark that sets off the omicron fire" and urged Germans to meet as few people as possible. And he called for people to refrain from unnecessary travel.

German officials say they're confident of fulfilling a pledge from last month to administer 30 million vaccine shots by the end of the year, and aim to get another 30 million shots in arms by the end of January.

Over the holiday period, "I'm asking for vaccination centers to be kept open, I'm asking for (doctors') practices to be used as vaccination

centers," Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said. "I think we have a unique opportunity here."

The Moderna vaccine is the mainstay of the booster campaign at present, and Germany also is using the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine.

German officials hope that some who so far have been reluctant to get vaccinated will be persuaded to take the Novavax vaccine, made using an older technology and newly authorized by the European Medicines Agency. Lauterbach said Germany has bought 4 million doses of it and hopes to deploy them soon.

So far, 70.5% of Germany's population of 83 million has received a full first round of vaccination, a figure that officials—who had aimed for a minimum 75%—aren't satisfied with.

Meanwhile, 33.6% have received booster shots. That number is growing rapidly, with an average 1.1 million shots per day administered over the past week, the fastest pace of the pandemic so far.

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