

Omicron drives new COVID wave spreading across South Africa

December 16 2021, by Andrew Meldrum



People living at the Soweto Home For The Aged practice social distancing during breakfast in Johannesburg, Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021. An analysis of data from South Africa shows the omicron variant appears to cause less severe disease than previous versions of the coronavirus, and the Pfizer vaccine seems to offer less defense against infection from it but still good protection against hospitalization. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Farrell

Amid fast-increasing new COVID-19 infections, South African officials on Thursday urged people to get vaccinated before traveling for the holidays and attending festive gatherings.

South Africa's daily new confirmed cases climbed to more than 26,900 on Wednesday and 24,700 on Thursday, the highest yet in the new wave driven by the omicron variant—and reaching the peak of an earlier surge in June and July caused by delta.

South Africa's 7-day rolling average of daily new cases has risen steeply over the past two weeks from 6.4 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 1 to 38.5 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 15, according to Johns Hopkins University. The rate of deaths has not increased over the same period, but health experts warn that fatalities can lag a few weeks after new cases.

The omicron variant is driving the current surge, as it's responsible for more than 90% of the new daily cases, scientists say, citing tests.

The new cases are increasing in almost all of South Africa's nine provinces, after previously being concentrated in Gauteng province, which includes the largest city, Johannesburg, and the capital Pretoria.

"This virus is spreading quicker than in previous waves, but the rates of hospitalizations and deaths remain relatively low," the department of health said in a statement Thursday.



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A man receives his vaccination shot by a member of the Western Cape Metro EMS (Emergency Medical Services) at a mobile "Vaxi Taxi" which is an ambulance converted into a mobile COVID 19 vaccination site in Blackheath in Cape Town, South Africa, Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021. The omicron variant appears to cause less severe disease than previous versions of the coronavirus, and the Pfizer vaccine seems to offer less defense against infection from it but still good protection from hospitalization, according to an analysis of data from South Africa, where the new variant is driving a surge in infections. Credit: AP Photo/Nardus Engelbrecht

"We call upon all travelers, especially those who are unvaccinated or partly vaccinated coming from areas declared hotspots, to get vaccinated before hitting the roads," Health Minister Joe Phaahla said.

He said this would "protect (travelers') families and friends they will be visiting during this period associated with large social gatherings like parties and weddings, which can be 'super spreader' events that carry a huge risk of transmission of the virus."

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