

Omicron keeps world jittery as more information drips out

December 1 2021, by Raf Casert and Mari Yamaguchi



An international arrivals lobby is deserted at Narita International Airport in Narita, east of Tokyo, Japan, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Japan's NHK national television said the country's transport ministry on Wednesday, Dec. 1, requested international airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in Japan until the end of December. Credit: Miyuki Saito/Kyodo News via AP

The coronavirus's omicron variant kept a jittery world off-kilter Wednesday as reports of infections linked to the mutant strain cropped up in more parts of the globe, and one official said that the wait for more information on its dangers felt like "an eternity."

At the same time, the dominant delta variant continued to unsettle nations, especially in Europe, where many are still dealing with a surge in infections and hospitalizations and some are considering mandatory vaccinations.

Much is still unknown [about omicron](#), including how contagious it is and whether it can evade vaccines. But governments have nevertheless rushed to impose restrictions they hoped would keep it out—moves that appeared increasingly futile, as Wednesday brought the first known cases in West Africa and [the Gulf region](#). Showing an increasingly complicated web of contagion, Japan reported an omicron case in a man who came from Peru via Qatar.

"Scientists say the amount of mutations worries us," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and said it would take "two to three weeks" before it became fully clear what omicron could foist on the world.

"This is, in normal times, a short period. In pandemic times, it's an eternity," she said.

The worry and uncertainty about the new variant and the sometimes haphazard imposition of restrictions recalled the early days of the pandemic, as did the familiar realization that the virus had once again outpaced efforts to contain it.



People queue for Pfizer COVID-19 vaccinations in the Wizink Center in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Health authorities in the Spanish capital have confirmed a second case of the omicron coronavirus variant in a 61-year-old woman who had returned from a trip to South Africa on Monday. Credit: AP Photo/Paul White

South African researchers alerted the World Health Organization to omicron last week, but it is not known where or when the variant first emerged, though it's clear it was circulating in Europe before that alert. Nigeria initially stretched that timeline back even further, saying it found the variant in samples collected in October—but it later corrected that to say the cases were detected in travelers who arrived in the country in the past week.

Regardless, the cases were the first reported in West Africa, while Saudi Arabia detected the first for a Gulf nation, a day after Brazil reported the first known one in Latin America.

Many countries around the world have barred travelers from southern Africa, and some have gone even further. Japan has banned foreign visitors and asked international airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in the country until the end of December—among the most severe measures anywhere.



A nurse speaks to people waiting to be vaccinated with a COVID-19 vaccine at a public hospital in Harare, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa has urged people eligible for COVID-19 vaccination to get the jab amid fears of the omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi

The U.S. is working toward requiring that all air travelers to the country be tested for COVID-19 within a day before boarding their flight. Currently those who are fully vaccinated may present a test taken within three days of boarding.

Leaders also continued to hammer home that the best way to contain the pandemic remains vaccinations.

For the first time, von der Leyen said that EU nations, should consider making vaccinations mandatory, like several have done for certain sectors, or like Austria, overall. In all, 67% of the EU's population is vaccinated—but that relatively high rate hasn't stopped several countries from seeing surges.

EU nations are taking different approaches now on pushing the shots. Starting in mid-January, Greece plans to impose 100-euro per month fines on people over 60 who don't get vaccinated.



Air China flight crew members in hazmat suits walk through the arrivals area at Los Angeles International Airport in Los Angeles, Tuesday, Nov. 30, 2021. Brazil and Japan joined the rapidly widening circle of countries to report cases of the omicron variant of the coronavirus on Tuesday. Credit: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

"The data is irrefutable: Nine out of 10 Greeks who lose their lives are over the age of 60 and more than eight out of 10 of the people (who die) are unvaccinated," Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told parliament.

On the other hand, Slovakia is considering to give that age group 500 euros if they step forward for the shot. German chancellor-designate Olaf Scholz, meanwhile, said he will back a proposal to mandate

coronavirus vaccinations for everybody next year.

Laurence Boone, chief economist at the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, pointed out that vaccination makes good economic sense too.

"The G20 countries have spent 10 trillion dollars supporting people and their economies since the beginning of the pandemic. It would only take 50 billion dollars to ensure vaccination worldwide," Boone said. "I'm just saying."



A medical worker receives a booster shot of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021, at Fujita Health University Hospital, in Toyoake city, central Japan. Japan on Wednesday started offering booster shots of coronavirus

vaccine, starting with healthcare workers, to further bolster immunity in the country amid growing concerns about a new variant of the virus. Credit: Mizuki Ikari/Kyodo News via AP

The world economy recovered faster than expected from the initial stage of the pandemic, but Boone warned it could all change quickly, especially since governments have often relaxed restrictions in a push to return to normalcy when the virus was far from contained.

"We are very concerned that many lessons have not been learned from recent experiences and the news about the omicron variant may actually be a reminder of how shortsighted that failure has been," Boone said.

In the 27-nation EU, intensive care doctors are livid that politicians have not taken tougher action on mask use or ordered closures of restaurants, bars and leisure venues to make sure their units are not filled to overflow again.

Germany's intensive care association warned Wednesday that the number of COVID-19 patients requiring intensive care will hit a new high before Christmas—and that it expected the all-time high from last year to be exceeded.



People willing to be vaccinated sit in the vaccination booths at the Vaccination Center at Messe Dresden, Germany, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. The vaccination centre, which was closed two months ago, has been restarted. Credit: Sebastian Kahnert/dpa via AP



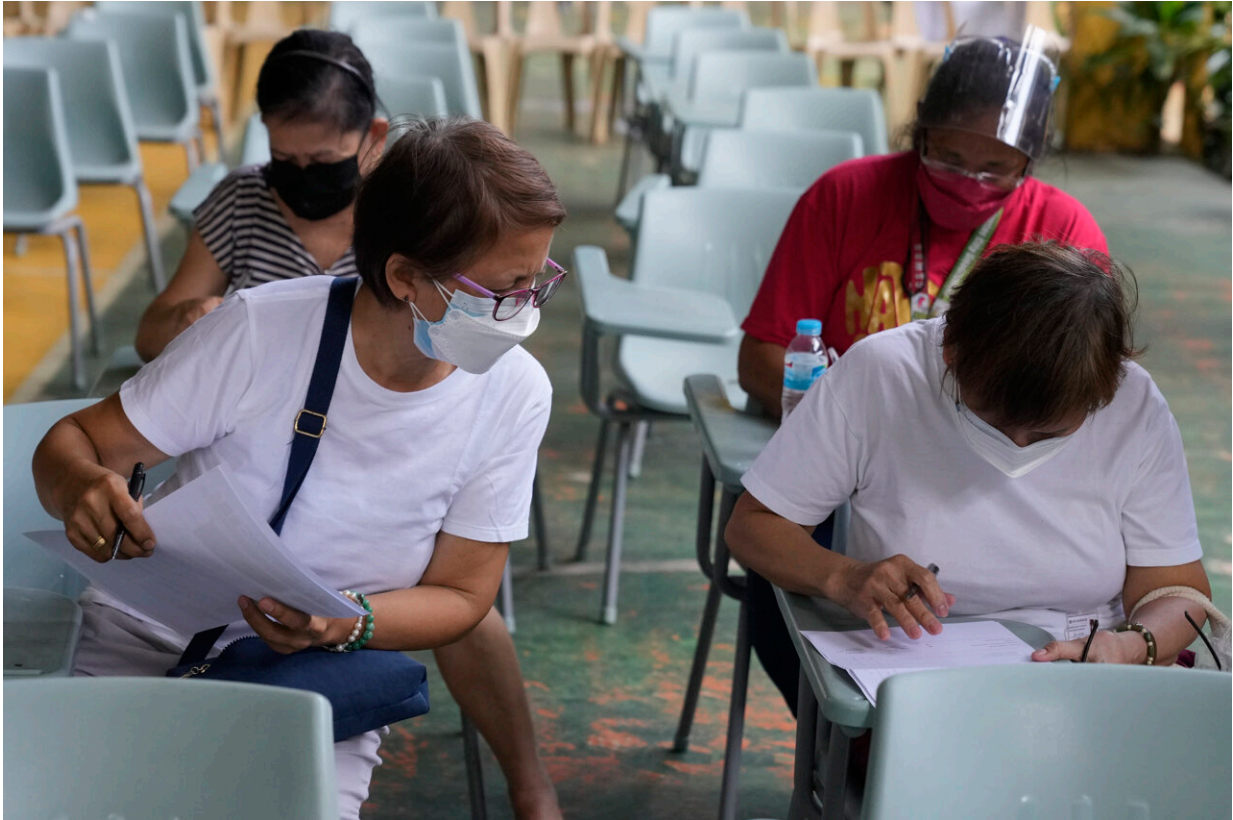
People wearing protective face masks walk along the Orchard Road shopping area in Singapore on Nov. 28, 2021. When Singapore embarked upon its strategy of "living with COVID," backed by one of the world's leading vaccine programs, the wealthy city-state saw a spike in its rate of infections, leading many to question whether the time was right. Credit: AP Photo/Annabelle Liang



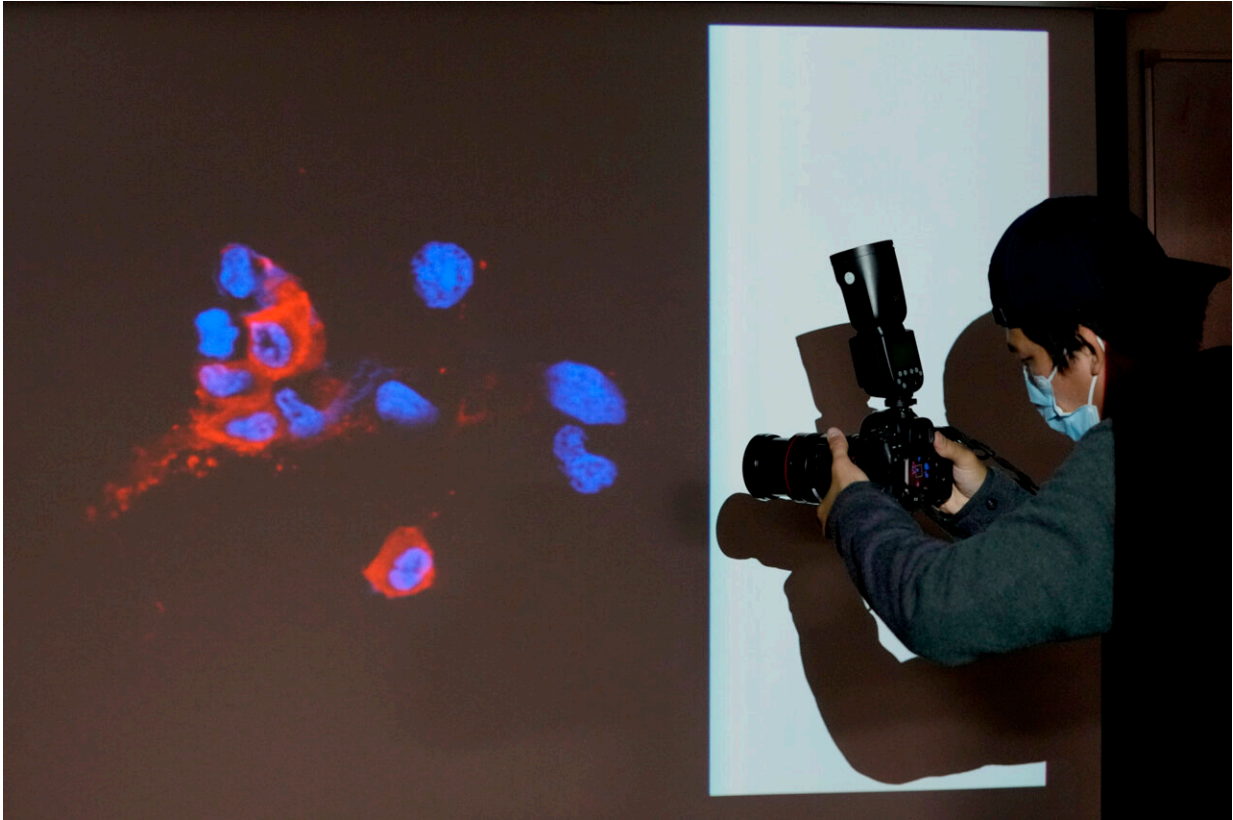
A health worker administers the vaccine for COVID-19 in Prayagraj, India, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Rajesh Kumar Singh



Quarantine officers wait to guide travelers at the arrival hall of the Incheon International Airport In Incheon, South Korea, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. South Korea's daily jump in coronavirus infections exceeded 5,000 for the first time since the start of the pandemic, as a delta-driven surge also pushed hospitalizations and deaths to record highs. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon



A woman talks with another as they fill up forms prior during a nationwide vaccination drive at a school in Navotas, Philippines on Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. There has been no reported infection so far caused by the new coronavirus variant in the Philippines, a Southeast Asian pandemic hotspot where COVID-19 cases have considerably dropped, but the emergence of the omicron virus variant has set off a new alarm. Credit: AP Photo/Aaron Favila



A photographer takes photo of a projector image showing immunofluorescence staining of omicron infected Vero E6 cells in Hong Kong, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Researchers at The University of Hong Kong have succeeded in isolating the omicron coronavirus variant from clinical specimens, making them the first research team in Asia that has succeeded in this regard, the university said.

Credit: AP Photo/Kin Cheung



People wait to be tested for COVID -19 at a public hospital in Harare, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa has urged people eligible for COVID-19 vaccination to get the jab amid fears of the omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi



People use their smartphones to register for COVID-19 tests at a mobile coronavirus testing facility outside an office complex in Beijing, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Although China has so far largely controlled the spread of COVID-19 in recent months, a negative coronavirus test is often required for domestic travel or to attend some events. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein



A man gets instructions from a worker inside a mobile coronavirus testing facility at an office complex in Beijing, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. Although China has so far largely controlled the spread of COVID-19 in recent months, a negative coronavirus test is often required for domestic travel or to attend some events. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein



A traveler arrives to enter into a COVID-19 testing center at the Incheon International Airport In Incheon, South Korea, Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021. South Korea's daily jump in coronavirus infections exceeded 5,000 for the first time since the start of the pandemic, as a delta-driven surge also pushed hospitalizations and deaths to record highs. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon



A woman has her hair done in an informal settlement in Zandspruit, South Africa, Wednesday Dec. 1, 2021. Despite the global worry, doctors in South Africa are reporting patients with the omicron variant are suffering mostly mild symptoms so far. But they warn that it is early. Also, most of the new cases are in people in their 20s and 30s, who generally do not get as sick from COVID-19 as older patients. Credit: AP Photo/Jerome Delay

The DIVI association called for national restrictions to slow the spread immediately. German federal and state leaders are expected to decide Thursday on new measures to curb a sharp recent rise in coronavirus infections.

Austria, meanwhile, [extended its lockdown until Dec. 11](#) as planned amid signs that the measures are helping to bring down a sky-high

coronavirus infection rate there.

Germany and Austria are among several nations in Europe seeing surges—even some with high vaccination rates. Portugal—with an 88% vaccination rate that is among the highest globally—tightened entry requirements and mandated masks indoors Wednesday to slow an upward trend in. Until recently, the country was shielded from the spikes experienced by elsewhere on the continent.

South Korea, which is also seeing a delta-driven surge that has pushed hospitalizations and deaths to record highs, also extended a lockdown. The country on Wednesday reported a daily jump in coronavirus infections that exceeded 5,000 for the first time.

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Citation: Omicron keeps world jittery as more information drips out (2021, December 1) retrieved 29 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-omicron-world-jittery.html>

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