

# Soaring infections rattle Europe, fuel dread about holidays

December 17 2021, by Danica Kirka and Mike Corder

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Two people with Santa hats hug as people wearing face coverings walks past, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Soaring infections in Britain driven in part by the omicron variant of the coronavirus rattled Europe on Thursday, prompting new restrictions on the Continent and fueling a familiar dread on both sides of the Atlantic about entering a new phase of the pandemic just in time for the holidays.

Much remains unknown about omicron, but officials increasingly warn that it appears more transmissible than the [delta variant](#), which has already put pressure on hospitals worldwide. With so many questions unanswered, uncertainty reigned over how quickly and how severely to crack down on Christmas travel and year-end parties.

After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before.

In England, the chief medical officer urged people to limit who they see in the festive period. Pubs and restaurants said many people were heeding that advice by canceling Christmas parties, though there has been much debate about what's OK to do. In the U.S., the White House insisted [there was no need for a lockdown](#), despite signs that omicron was gaining ground there.



A woman wears a face mask as she walks in Covent Garden market, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Globally, more than 75 countries have reported confirmed cases of the new variant. In Britain, where omicron cases are doubling every two to three days, omicron was expected to soon replace delta as the dominant strain in the country. The government has accelerated its booster program in response. Authorities in the 27-nation European Union say omicron will [be the dominant variant in the bloc by mid-January.](#)



Early data suggests that omicron may be milder but better at evading vaccines—making booster shots more crucial. Experts have urged caution in particular about drawing conclusions because hospitalizations lag behind infections and because many variables contribute to how sick people get.

Even if omicron proves milder on the whole than delta, it may disarm some of the lifesaving tools available and put immune-compromised and elderly people at particular risk. And if it's more transmissible, more infections overall raise the risk that more cases will be serious.



Stewards check the fans for their COVID-19 pass on the smartphone prior to the start of the English Premier League soccer match between Chelsea and Everton, at the Stamford Bridge stadium in London, Thursday, Dec.16, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Alastair Grant

While experts gather the data, some governments rushed to act, while others sought to calm fears that the new variant would land countries back on square one.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted Thursday that the situation in the U.K. is different from last year because of the widespread use of vaccines and the ability to test.

If people want to attend an event "the sensible thing to do is to get a test and to make sure that you're being cautious," he said.

"But we're not saying that we want to cancel stuff. We're not locking stuff down, and the fastest route back to normality is to get boosted," he said.

Professor Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, struck a more cautious note, advising people earlier in the week to limit their social contacts.

On Thursday, he told a parliamentary committee hearing that the government could have to review measures if vaccines prove less effective than expected against omicron.



People, some wearing masks, queue to get tested, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

He said that "would be a material change to how ministers viewed the risks going forward."

Among those taking the more cautious route was Queen Elizabeth II, who opted to cancel her traditional pre-Christmas family lunch.



In the United States, President Joe Biden's administration said tighter restrictions are not planned. He said the omicron variant is not spreading as fast as in Europe because of steps his administration has taken.

However, he warned that unvaccinated Americans faced "a winter of severe illness and death."

White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeff Zients said that the U.S. was "in a very different and stronger place than we were a year ago."

Still, feelings of unease persisted among some people.

Michael Stohl, 32, was relieved when he got the Pfizer vaccine last spring, but the spread of omicron has turned his optimism to dread.



Doctors wearing protective gear are reflected in a mirror at the intensive care unit of Honved Hospital treating COVID-19 patients, in Budapest, Hungary, Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021. Credit: Zoltan Balogh/MTI via AP

"Even though I'm fully vaccinated right now, that doesn't seem to give me any sort of guarantee anymore," he said. "It just puts this anxiety over you because they tell you the boosters will work, but that's what they said about the original vaccines. Am I going to have to keep getting vaccinated every couple months?"

He said he booked an appointment to receive his booster shot Thursday morning.

Stohl, who works at the concierge desk at an apartment building in downtown Washington, said his family all lives in the city so he isn't traveling for Christmas. However, he worries about friends and coworkers who will travel.

"I just remember how bad everything was last year, and it's looking like it might be that bad again," he said.

People in the Netherlands, meanwhile, have been in a partial lockdown since November to curb a delta-driven surge. While infection numbers are now declining, the government this week ordered elementary schools to close for Christmas a week early amid fears of a new rise. Authorities also sped up a booster campaign as caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte cited Britain as an example of how swiftly the variant can spread.





A face mask on the ground in Westminster, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

[EU leaders gathering in Brussels](#) for a summit Thursday sought to balance tackling the surge of infections across the continent while keeping borders open with common policies throughout the bloc.

"Let's try to maintain the European solution," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said. "If every country goes it alone again, we'll be

even further from home."

But ahead of the meeting, European nations already were acting to rein in the spread. Greece and Italy tightened entry requirements for travelers earlier this week, and Portugal decided to keep stricter border controls in place beyond their planned Jan. 9 end.

France said Thursday that it will slap restrictions on travelers arriving from the U.K.—which is no longer part of the EU—putting limits on reasons for traveling and requiring 48 hours of isolation upon arrival. The new measures will take effect early Saturday.



A medical staffer prepares a shot of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, at a vaccination center in Ramsgate, England, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. Spiraling infections in Britain driven in part by the new omicron variant of the coronavirus

sent shockwaves into the rest of Europe, fueling a familiar dread that tighter restrictions will scuttle holiday plans again this year. Credit: Leon Neal, Pool via AP

French Prime Minister Jean Castex said the measures were being imposed "in the face of the extremely rapid spread of the omicron variant in the U.K."

The abrupt move comes after weeks of political tensions between France and Britain over fishing rights and how to deal with migration across the English Channel. The French government is desperately trying to avoid a new lockdown that would hurt the economy and cloud President Emmanuel Macron's expected reelection campaign.

Waiting outside a Paris train station, Constantin Dobrynin said that he sometimes felt governments over-reacted and imposed unnecessary measures. As for [omicron](#), it wasn't yet clear how serious it would be.

"So we should be balanced, and we shouldn't be panicked," he said.

Britain said it was not planning reciprocal measures.

Fearing a raft of canceled parties and a general drop in business at the height of the crucial and lucrative Christmas season, British restaurants and pubs demanded government help Thursday. They said concerns about the new variant have already wiped out 2 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) in sales over the last 10 days.





People sit at outside tables in Covent Garden Market, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks to a member of the public during a visit to a vaccination center in Ramsgate, England, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021.  
Credit: Leon Neal, Pool via AP





A woman wears a face shield as she walks past an image of Santa Claus at a Christmas market, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali





People queue outside the vaccination centre at St Thomas' Hospital, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali



People, some wearing a mask, enjoy the fake snow in Covent Garden, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali





A woman woman looks at ornaments at a stand in a small Christmas market in the center of Brussels, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. Several EU countries are accelerating vaccinations against the coronavirus before Christmas as infections surge and more people with COVID-19 seek medical attention. Credit: AP Photo/Olivier Matthys





A general view of the interior of a converted call center, which is being used as an NHS Covid-19 vaccination center in Ramsgate, England, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. Credit: Leon Neal, Pool via AP



People, some wearing masks, sit on a London Underground train, in London, Thursday, Dec. 16, 2021. The U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned the situation is likely to get worse as the omicron variant drives a new wave of illness during the Christmas holidays. The U.K. recorded 78,610 new infections on Wednesday, 16% higher than the previous record set in January. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

Across London, restaurants that would normally see bustling crowds clinking glasses and tucking into festive meals were reporting droves of cancellations and empty rooms.

"It's a complete nightmare. ... This week should be the busiest week of the year for hospitality," said Sally Abé, a chef at the Conrad Hotel in

central London. "It's everywhere, everybody's canceling, but there's no support from the government."

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