

'Another storm coming': WHO warns of omicron surge in Europe

December 21 2021



Christmas shoppers make their way along the High Street in Winchester, England, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Monday that his government reserves the "possibility of taking further action" to protect public health as Omicron spreads across the country. Credit: Andrew Matthews/PA via AP

The World Health Organization's top official in Europe urged governments on Tuesday to prepare for a "significant surge" in coronavirus cases across the continent due to the omicron variant, which is already dominant in several countries.

"We can see another storm coming," WHO Europe regional director Dr. Hans Kluge said at a press conference in Vienna. "Within weeks, omicron will dominate in more countries of the region, pushing already stretched [health systems](#) further to the brink."

Omicron has been detected in at least 38 of the WHO European region's 53 members, Kluge added, noting that it is already the dominant variant in the United Kingdom, Denmark and Portugal.

Last week, 27,000 people died from coronavirus in the region and an additional 2.6 million cases were reported, Kluge said. Although these cases include all variants, not just omicron, he noted this figure is 40% higher than during the same period last year.

"The sheer volume of new COVID-19 infections could lead to more hospitalizations and widespread disruption to health systems and other critical services," he said.

Thus far, Kluge said 89% of those with confirmed omicron infections in Europe reported symptoms common with other coronavirus variants, including cough, sore throat, fever. The variant has mostly been spread by [young people](#) in their 20s and 30s in the region, he added.



Children wait with their father as they wait in a line spanning several blocks in order to be tested for COVID-19, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021, at a Curative testing kiosk outside an elementary school in northwest Washington. The Washington family said they were testing the children as a precaution due to cold symptoms. Credit: AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin



People wait in a line spanning several blocks for COVID-19 testing, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021, at a Curative testing kiosk outside an elementary school in northwest Washington. Credit: AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin



People wearing face masks to protect against COVID-19 walk past the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021. Nations across Europe have moved to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Michel Euler



Medical workers treat a patient with COVID-19 in the intensive care unit (ICU) at the hospital "Reseau hospitalier neuchatelois (RHNe)" Pourtales site during the fifth wave of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in Neuchatel, Switzerland, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021. Credit: Laurent Gillieron/Keystone via AP



People walk on a shopping road in Berlin, Germany, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021. Germany's leaders are set to decide on new restrictions, likely to come in after Christmas, aimed at slowing the spread of the new omicron variant of COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Sohn

Although much remains unknown about omicron, Kluge said it appears to be more infectious than previous variants, leading to "previously unseen transmission rates" in countries with a significant number of omicron cases. In those countries, cases of the variant are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days.

European governments should keep ramping up their vaccination campaigns, introduce additional measures to slow the spread of the

variant, and prepare critical infrastructure like health care systems for the coming surge, Kluge said.

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