

UK health boss: COVID-19 rules could tighten by Christmas

December 19 2021, by Danica Kirka



Shoppers walk along Oxford Street, Europe's busiest shopping street, in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Soaring infections in Britain driven in part by the omicron variant of the coronavirus are rattling Europe. The renewed spread prompted new restrictions on the Continent and fueled a familiar dread on both sides of the Atlantic about entering a new phase of the pandemic just in time for the holidays. Credit: AP Photo/Frank Augstein

Britain's health secretary has refused to rule out imposing tougher COVID-19 restrictions before Christmas amid the rapid rise of infections and continuing uncertainty about the omicron variant.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Sunday that the government was assessing the fast-moving situation and urged the public to be cautious as scientists examine the data. Much is still unknown about the highly transmissible new variant, even as hospitals brace for a surge in infections, he told the BBC.

"There are no guarantees in this pandemic, I don't think," Javid replied when asked about the potential for new restrictions. "At this point we just have to keep everything under review."

Prime Minister Boris Johnson last week reinstated rules requiring face masks in shops and ordered people to show proof of vaccination or a negative coronavirus test before entering nightclubs and other crowded venues. He has championed a program that relies on vaccines, an operation that delivered 830,000 booster shots on Saturday alone.

Vaccination sites are being asked to operate 12 hours a day, seven days a week with shopping centers, cathedrals and soccer stadiums into mass vaccination centers. Some sites are working 24 hours a day to make it easier for people who work shifts.

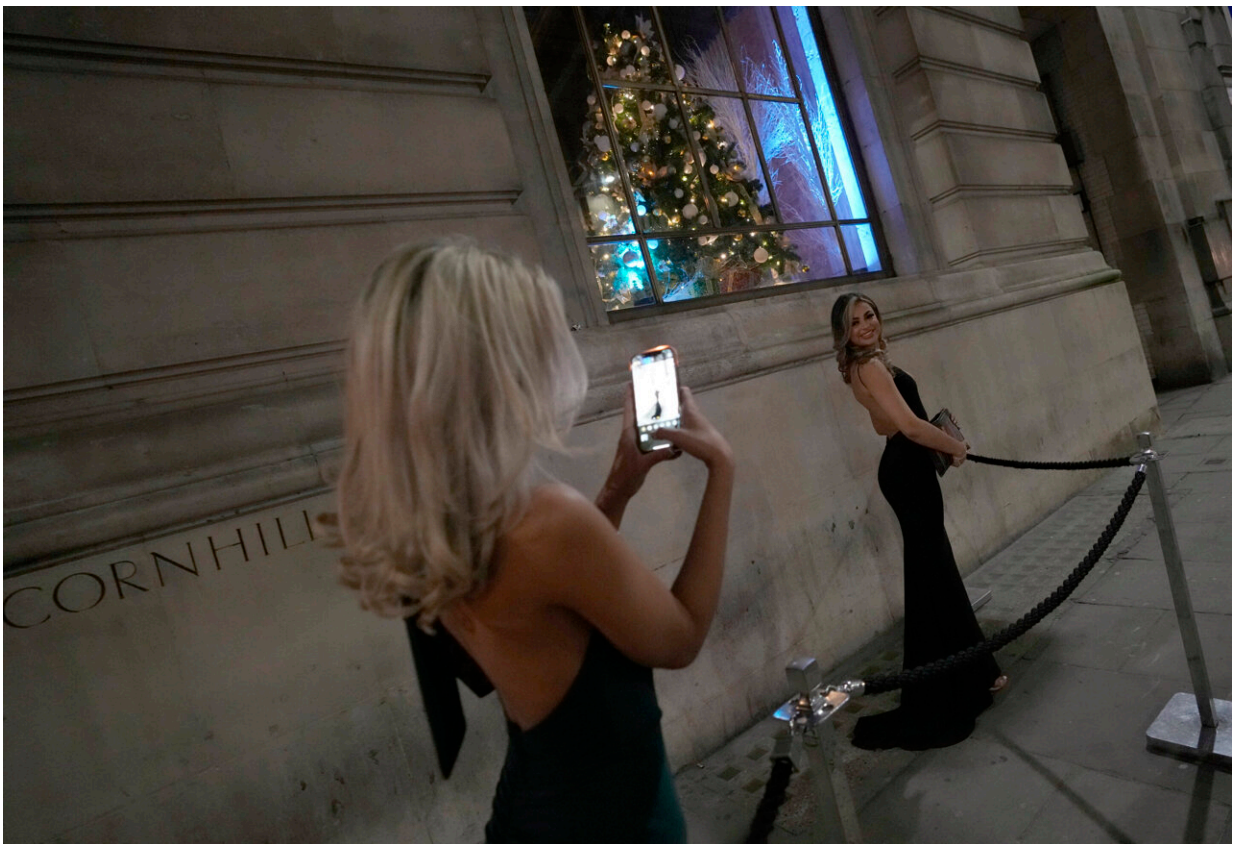


Anti -COVID-19 vaccination protesters demonstrate on Whitehall near Downing Street, in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Ian West/PA via AP

But the government's scientific advisers believe it won't be enough and have recommended more far-reaching restrictions to prevent U.K. hospitals from being overwhelmed, according to leaked minutes from a meeting of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies seen by the BBC.

"We can't wait for hospitalizations to go through the roof before we do something about it, because by then it's too late," Professor David Spiegelhalter told Sky News.

The British Medical Association is warning that almost 50,000 doctors, nurses and other National Health Service staff in England could be off sick with Covid-19 by Christmas Day unless additional measures are introduced. Johnson's Conservative government needs further measures beyond just trying to vaccine-boost its way out of the situation, said Chaand Nagpaul, chair of the association's council.



Two women dressed for a party take photos of each other outside a venue in London, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. On what would normally be one of the busiest times for pubs and restaurants just before Christmas, customer numbers are down in central London due to concerns about the new omicron variant. Friday night in Central London was muted with one bar saying they have 30 customers inside when there should have been 170, with large amounts of cancellations in recent days. Credit: AP Photo/Alastair Grant

"The reality is that MPs (lawmakers) have broken up for Christmas leaving the NHS brutally exposed to suffer the consequences of surging case rates and without the restrictions needed to bring these under control," Nagpaul said. "Doctors are not only incredibly worried about the potential impact this could have on hospitalizations, but also about what it would mean for [patient care](#) across the NHS if we have vast swathes of staff off sick."

The government on Sunday reported 82,886 more lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases in a day. With over 147,000 deaths, Britain already has Europe's highest COVID-19 death toll after Russia.

Nations across Europe are moving quickly to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the omicron variant. The Dutch government began a tough nationwide lockdown starting Sunday to rein in sharply rising infections and alarmed ministers in France, Germany, Austria and Cyprus have tightened travel restrictions.



Anti -COVID-19 vaccination protesters demonstrate on Parliament Square in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Ian West/PA via AP



Anti -COVID-19 vaccination protesters demonstrate on Whitehall near Downing Street, in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Ian West/PA via AP



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Anti -COVID-19 vaccination protesters react with police during a protest on Whitehall, in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Dominic Lipinski//PA via AP



Police in riot gear during an anti COVID-19 vaccination demonstration on Whitehall, in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Dominic Lipinski//PA via AP

Ireland imposed an 8 p.m. curfew on pubs and bars and limited attendance at indoor and outdoor events. Paris canceled its New Year's Eve fireworks.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan underscored concerns about the climbing COVID-19 cases and their potential to overwhelm the health care system by declaring a major incident Saturday, a move that allows local councils in Britain's capital to coordinate more closely with emergency services.

That came the same day as protesters marched in London to decry the new restrictions.

The World Health Organization reported Saturday that omicron has been detected in 89 countries. It says COVID-19 cases involving the variant are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days in places with community transmission.

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