

UK hikes virus alert level as omicron variant surges

December 12 2021



People wear face coverings as they walk through Westminster, in London, Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced tighter restrictions to stem the spread of the omicron variant. He is again urging people to work from home and mandating COVID-19 passes to get into nightclubs and large events. Credit: AP Photo/Frank Augstein

The British government raised the country's official coronavirus threat level on Sunday, warning the rapid spread of the omicron variant had pushed the U.K. into risky territory.

The chief medical officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland said the emergence of the highly transmissible new strain "adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and health care services" at a time when COVID-19 is already widespread. They recommended raising the alert level from 3 to 4 on a 5-point scale. The top level, 5, indicates authorities think the health care system is about to be overwhelmed.

The doctors said early evidence shows [omicron](#) is spreading much faster than the currently dominant delta variant, and that vaccines offer less protection against it. British officials say omicron is likely to replace delta as the dominant strain in the U.K. within days.

"Data on severity will become clearer over the coming weeks but hospitalizations from omicron are already occurring and these are likely to increase rapidly," they said.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson was due to make a televised statement about Britain's coronavirus situation and the booster vaccination campaign on Sunday evening.

Concerns about the new variant led Johnson's Conservative government to reintroduce restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must be worn in most indoor settings, [vaccine](#) certificates must be shown to enter nightclubs and people are being urged to work from home if possible.

Many scientists say that's unlikely to be enough, however, and are calling for tougher measures.

Johnson's government is trying to avoid that, but aims to offer everyone 18 and over a booster shot by the end of January.

Scientists in South Africa, where omicron was first identified, say they see [signs it may cause less severe disease than delta](#), but caution that it is too soon to be certain.

The U.K. Health Security Agency said Friday that both the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines appear less effective in preventing symptomatic infections in people exposed to omicron, though preliminary data show that effectiveness appears to rise to between 70% and 75% after a third vaccine dose.

© 2021 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: UK hikes virus alert level as omicron variant surges (2021, December 12) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-uk-hikes-virus-omicron-variant.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--