

UK buys millions of COVID pills, cuts isolation period

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The UK government announced Wednesday it is buying millions of doses of new COVID treatment pills as the Omicron variant takes hold, while cutting the isolation period for positive cases.

The government said it has signed deals to buy 4.25 million courses of two new antiviral drugs: Pfizer's ritonavir and US rival Merck/MSD's molnupiravir, which will be available early next year.

This comes on top of government announcements in October of the procurement of several hundreds of thousands of doses, and was hailed as a "mammoth deal" by Health Secretary Sajid Javid.

Molnupiravir, sold as Lagevrio, is being used in a national trial run by the University of Oxford that [people](#) can join if they have [virus](#) symptoms.

The government said it is also being made available to those who are at high risk of severe illness, such as people with cancer.

The UK was the first country in the world to approve the pill in November this year.

Pfizer's pill, marketed as Paxlovid, has yet to be authorised anywhere in the world.

Pfizer said Tuesday that [clinical trials](#) showed it reduced hospital admissions and deaths among at-risk people by almost 90 percent, when taken a few days after symptoms began.

The [government](#) said it will be rolled out in the same way as molnupiravir "as quickly as possible" if the UK regulator approves it.

The UK has seen a surge in infections since Omicron became the dominant variant, with 90,629 cases reported Tuesday. The country is one of the hardest hit in Europe, with a [death toll](#) of 147,433.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has resisted calls to impose stricter virus

restrictions over Christmas in England, unlike the devolved governments in other UK nations.

From Wednesday, those who have caught the virus but feel well can come out of self-isolation after seven days instead of 10, potentially allowing more to join family celebrations.

This rule only applies to people who have taken two negative lateral flow tests, NHS England said.

At the same time, UK leaders were expected to announce fresh virus measures for the post-Christmas period.

Large New Year's Eve events have already been cancelled in London and Edinburgh.

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