

England lifts COVID restrictions as omicron threat recedes

January 27 2022, by Sylvia Hui



People wear face masks to curb the spread of coronavirus, which is still a mandatory requirement on Transport for London public transport services, as they travel on a bus going over London Bridge towards the City of London financial district during the morning rush hour in London, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022. The British government have asked people to return to working in offices starting Monday as they ease coronavirus restrictions. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

Most coronavirus restrictions, including mandatory face masks, were lifted in England on Thursday after Britain's government said its vaccine booster rollout successfully reduced serious illness and COVID-19 hospitalizations.

From Thursday, face coverings are no longer required by law anywhere in England, and a legal requirement for COVID-19 passes for entry into nightclubs and other large venues has been scrapped.

The government last week dropped its advice for people to work from home, as well as guidance for face coverings in classrooms. From next week, restrictions on the number of visitors to nursing homes will also be lifted.

England isn't the only place in Europe ditching coronavirus restrictions this week. On Wednesday, [the Netherlands](#) reopened restaurants, bars, museums and theaters for the first time in a month as part of broader easing of restrictions. The step came as infections in the country spiked, though admissions to intensive care units have been declining.

In Denmark, [Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said Wednesday](#) that from Feb. 1 Danes can enjoy free access to restaurants, museums and nightclubs, and the mandatory requirement to wear face masks on public transport and in shops will also be scrapped.

In contrast, German leaders this week decided to [keep in place](#) the country's existing restrictions, including limits on the size of private gatherings, as the omicron variant continues to fuel a steep rise in infections.



Workers walk over London Bridge towards the City of London financial district during the morning commute, in London, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022. The British government have asked people to return to working in offices starting Monday as they ease coronavirus restrictions. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

England's so-called "Plan B" measures were introduced in early December to stop the rapid spread of omicron from overwhelming health services and to buy time for the population to get its booster vaccine shot.

Officials said Thursday that almost 84% of people over 12 in the U.K. have had their second vaccine dose, and that of those eligible, 81% have received their booster shot.

Hospital admissions and the number of people in intensive care units have stabilized or fallen, and daily cases have dropped from a peak of over 200,000 around New Year to under 100,000.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said last week that the surge of omicron infections "has now peaked nationally."

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said the vaccine rollout, testing and development of antiviral treatments have combined to make "some of the strongest defenses in Europe," allowing a "cautious return" to normality.



Workers walk over London Bridge towards the City of London financial district, backdropped by Tower Bridge, during the morning rush hour, in London, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022. The British government have asked people to return to

working in offices starting Monday as they ease coronavirus restrictions. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

But he added that "as we learn to live with COVID, we need to be clear eyed that this virus is not going away." While infections continue to fall, health officials said omicron remained prevalent across the country, especially among children and the elderly. Coronavirus vaccines are not offered to children under 12 in the U.K.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which make their own public health rules, have similarly relaxed their virus restrictions.

Although legal requirements were being rolled back, some shops—including major supermarket chains Sainsbury's and Tesco—and public transport operators say they will continue to ask people to don their face masks. London Mayor Sadiq Khan said face coverings will still be required on the capital's buses and subway trains, but it's unclear how that will be enforced.

The legal requirement for those infected to self-isolate for five full days remains, but Johnson said that measure will also end soon, to be replaced with advice and guidance for those infected to be cautious.

British health officials have said they are planning a longer-term, post-pandemic strategy that treats COVID-19 more like the flu.

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