

Japan leader promises boosters, new measures against omicron

January 4 2022, by Yuri Kageyama



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, center, visits Ise Shrine in Ise, central Japan Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. Kishida vowed Tuesday to speed up coronavirus vaccine booster shots, secure imported oral drugs and reorganize medical facilities to respond to the fast-spreading omicron variant. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida vowed Tuesday to speed up coronavirus vaccine booster shots, secure imported supplies of drugs to treat COVID-19 and reorganize medical facilities to respond to the fast-spreading omicron variant.

Kishida, who took office in October, said he had ordered strict border controls from November to buy time for such preparations. Japan has basically shut out incoming travel except for returning residents and Japanese nationals.

The response to the contagious omicron variant will now shift to domestic measures, such as making free coronavirus tests more readily available, while border controls will continue, he said.

"I just offered prayers so that we may overcome the coronavirus pandemic and this year will be a fantastic year for all of you," he told reporters after praying at the Ise Shrine in Mie Prefecture, southwest of Tokyo.

Japanese leaders visit the picturesque shrine complex at the start of every year, although Kishida's predecessor Yoshihide Suga canceled it last year because of the pandemic.

Kishida said the oral drug from Merck has been distributed to thousands of hospitals, and efforts were underway to procure the Pfizer oral drug as well, for use starting next month in treating symptomatic coronavirus cases.



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, front center, visits Ise Shrine in Ise, central Japan Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. Kishida vowed Tuesday to speed up coronavirus vaccine booster shots, secure imported oral drugs and reorganize medical facilities to respond to the fast-spreading omicron variant. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

"I want to make this year one of dramatic challenges to forge ahead with a new era. But in areas where we need to exercise caution, we must not forget the humility to proceed with caution," Kishida added, noting care was needed for a proper pandemic response.

He said everyone who tests positive for COVID-19 and needs hospitalization will be speedily admitted for treatment, while those who can recover at home should do so, monitored by medical professionals.

Other facilities will also be readied for those who don't need to be hospitalized but need to quarantine, depending on symptoms, he said.

Although COVID-19 cases and deaths have fallen lately in Japan, worries are growing about another "sixth wave" of infections because of the omicron variant. Airports, shopping districts and shrines have been jam-packed with New Year's revelers, in contrast to last year when people generally stayed home.

About 80% of Japanese are fully vaccinated, but booster shots have barely begun. Some people in Japan died at home last year when hospitals got stretched thin. Japan has recorded more than 18,000 COVID-19-related deaths.



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, right, leaves after offering a prayer at Ise Shrine in Ise, central Japan Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. Kishida vowed Tuesday to speed up coronavirus vaccine booster shots, secure imported oral drugs and reorganize medical facilities to respond to the fast-spreading omicron variant. Credit: Kyodo News via AP



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida speaks at his New Year's press conference in Ise, central Japan Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. Kishida vowed Tuesday to speed up coronavirus vaccine booster shots, secure imported supplies of drugs to treat COVID-19 and reorganize medical facilities to respond to the fast-spreading omicron variant. Credit: Kyodo News via AP

"We will take proactive steps so that we are fully prepared, and our nation can all work together to overcome, without feeling an excessive fear of the omicron," said Kishida.

On other issues, Kishida said he stood by his "new capitalism" policies as bringing about a more vibrant Japan. The world's third largest economy has stagnated in recent decades, and the coronavirus pandemic has made things worse.

Kishida said Japan will go through "a second founding" by encouraging startups, [digital technology](#) and moves to combat climate change.

In recent decades, Japan has been ruled almost entirely by the Liberal Democratic Party. Suga stepped down after just a year in office, partly because of public disapproval about inadequate pandemic measures.

Shinzo Abe, Suga's predecessor, was Japan's longest serving prime minister. Abe stepped down for health reasons in August 2020. The question remains whether Kishida can stay in power, or Japan will revert to what has been called "a revolving chair" of leaders.

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Citation: Japan leader promises boosters, new measures against omicron (2022, January 4) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-japan-leader-boosters-omicron.html>

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