

Japan widens virus curbs, including in Tokyo, as cases surge

January 19 2022, by Mari Yamaguchi



People wearing face masks to help protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk along the street in Tokyo, Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022. The Japanese government announced Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2022, it will place Tokyo and a dozen other areas under a near-emergency status for COVID-19 effective Friday, allowing local leaders to shorten hours for eateries, as a surge in omicron cases threatens to paralyze society. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

Tokyo and a dozen other areas in Japan will face new COVID-19 restrictions effective Friday, with local leaders shortening hours for restaurants, as omicron cases hit a record high in the capital.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced that the areas will be placed under a three-week restraint through Feb. 13 following endorsement by experts and the parliament.

"We have decided that it is now necessary to prepare so that medical systems can firmly function, take appropriate measures and slow rising case numbers," Kishida said.

By working with local officials, taking steps based on experts' scientific judgment and cooperating with medical workers and the people, "we want to overcome this situation," he said.

Tokyo logged 7,377 new cases on Wednesday, its highest number since its previous record of 5,908 on Aug. 13. But the soaring cases are not yet straining the city's hospitals. Only about one-quarter of available beds have been filled in Tokyo and serious cases account for just 2% of all hospitalizations, according to the city government.

Japan has resisted the use of lockdowns to fight the pandemic and instead has focused on requiring restaurants and bars to close early and not serve alcohol, and on urging the public to wear masks and practice social distancing, as the government seeks to minimize damage to the economy.

Japan had been gradually expanding social and business activities since an earlier wave of infections subsided in September, which experts say was largely due to the country's rapid progress in rolling out the initial two doses of vaccines.

But experts say breakthrough infections by the omicron variant are common. The fast-spreading variant has caused a number of medical workers and others to self-isolate after testing positive or coming into close contact with someone who has. Sharply rising infections have already begun to paralyze hospitals, schools and other sectors in some areas.

The national government is taking action following requests by local governors, including Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike, who raised alarms about the possibility of essential public services, such as public transportation and garbage collection, grinding to a halt.

Nationwide, Japan logged more than 32,000 cases, bringing its total to 1.93 million cases, with 184,00 deaths. More than 134,000 patients are now quarantining or hospitalized for COVID-19, according to the Health Ministry.

Shigeru Omi, the government's top medical adviser, said vaccines no longer offer reliable protection against the omicron variant, making testing and social curbs among the only effective and realistic measures to prevent more infections.

Restrictions will be in place in 16 areas around the country, including three other prefectures—Okinawa, Hiroshima and Yamaguchi—which were put under similar measures earlier this month.

Kishida said the extent of the measures, including whether to ask bars and restaurants not to serve alcohol, is up to regional leaders.

The government will set up temporary oxygen stations for patients with breathing difficulties and increase production of pulse and oxygen meters and antigen test kits for an increasing number of patients expected to be monitored or treated at home, Kishida said.

Other areas, including badly hit Osaka, where 5,396 new cases were reported Tuesday, are taking a wait-and-see stance for now.

While about 80% of Japanese have received their first two vaccine doses, the rollout of booster shots nationwide has been slow and has reached only 1.3% of the population.

The government recently decided to cut the interval between the second and third shots to six months from eight for elderly people, but younger people are unlikely to get their turn until March or later.

While Kishida stressed the need for safety as justification for the restrictions, the measures are also seen as a move to gain public support ahead of this summer's parliamentary elections.

Critics also say the measures, which almost exclusively target bars and restaurants, make little sense and are unfair.

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