

S. Korea to expand testing, shorten quarantine for omicron

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A medical worker in a booth wears plastic gloves at a temporary screening clinic for the coronavirus in downtown Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022.
Credit: AP Photo/Lee Jin-man, Pool

South Korea will expand rapid testing and shorten quarantines as it reshapes its pandemic response to deal with a faster-than-expected surge

in coronavirus infections driven by the highly contagious omicron variant.

The plans were announced as the country reported 7,513 new cases of [infection](#) on Monday, the third straight day exceeding 7,000 and nearing a one-day high of 7,848 reported in December, when a devastating delta-driven spread spiked hospitalizations and deaths.

Omicron has now replaced delta as South Korea's most dominant variant after accounting for more than 50% of the infections reported last week, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency.

Some experts say the country could be seeing daily jumps of over 10,000 later this week. Transmissions could further accelerate over the Lunar New Year's holiday break from this weekend through Tuesday, a period when millions of [people](#) usually travel around the country to meet relatives.

Starting Wednesday, the quarantine for people who [test](#) positive after being fully vaccinated will be reduced from the current 10 days to seven days, KDCA Commissioner Jeong Eun-kyeong said during a briefing.

Fully vaccinated people who come in close contact with virus carriers will no longer be placed under quarantine, but they will be required to report their daily health conditions to officials before receiving a test within six or seven days.



People pass by a bench which is taped off for the social distancing measures and a precaution against the coronavirus at a subway station in Seoul, Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon).

Officials say the easing of quarantine restrictions is inevitable as they try to prevent an explosion in omicron cases from causing major disruption at workplaces and public services by putting huge numbers of people under quarantine.

The new rules will require people who aren't fully vaccinated to quarantine for seven days if they come in close contact with a virus carrier and 10 days if they test positive themselves. As of Monday, more than 85% of a population of more than 51 million were fully vaccinated and around 49% have gotten booster shots.

Officials also plan to rewire the country's testing regime that's currently centered around PCR tests and expand the use of rapid antigen tests to detect a larger number of infections sooner.

According to the plans, PCR tests will be mostly saved for high-risk groups, including people in their 60s and older or those with pre-existing [medical conditions](#). Most people will be asked to first use rapid test kits available at public health offices and pharmacies and receive PCR when those tests are positive.

While PCR tests have been described by medical experts as the "gold standard" for their accuracy and reliability, such tests require large numbers of health professionals administering nasal and throat swabs and high-tech laboratory machines analyzing samples.



People wearing face masks pass by a banner reminding precautions against the coronavirus at a park in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

The new testing process will be enforced from Wednesday at three cities near capital Seoul and the southern South Jeolla province—regions where the levels of omicron infections have been highest—before being expanded nationwide at the end of this month or early February, Jeong said.

"While the omicron variant leads to less serious cases (compared to delta), it's highly contagious and could cause a huge strain on our epidemiological and medical response if it leads to huge number of infections over a short period of time," she said.

Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum repeated a plea for people to stay home during the Lunar New Year's holidays, especially not to visit aging relatives who aren't fully vaccinated or haven't received their booster shots. Visits to nursing homes will be banned during the period and officials will also limit the capacity on trains and ferries to discourage travel.

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