

Mask rules get tighter in Europe in winter's COVID-19 wave

January 14 2022, by Frances D'emilio



People, some wearing surgical masks, others FFP2 masks, to cope with the surge of COVID-19 cases stroll past stalls at the Porta Portese open air market, in Rome, Sunday, Jan. 9, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are reinstating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia

To mask or not to mask is a question Italy settled early in the COVID-19 outbreak with a vigorous "yes." Now the onetime epicenter of the pandemic in Europe hopes even stricter mask rules will help it beat the latest infection surge.

Other countries are taking similar action as the more transmissible—yet, apparently, less virulent—omicron variant spreads through the continent.

With intensive care units in Italy's hospitals rapidly filling with mostly unvaccinated COVID-19 patients, the government announced on Christmas Eve that FFP2 masks—which offer users more protection than cloth or surgical masks—must be worn on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and subways.

That's even though all passengers in Italy, as of this week, must be vaccinated or recently recovered from COVID-19. FFP2s also must now be worn at theaters, cinemas and sports events, indoors or out, and can't be removed even for their wearers to eat or drink.

Italy reintroduced an outdoor mask mandate. It had never lifted its indoor mandate—even when infections sharply dropped in the summer.

On a chilly morning in Rome this week, Lillo D'Amico, 84, sported a wool cap and white FFP2 as he bought a newspaper at his neighborhood newsstand.

"(Masks) cost little money, they cost you a small sacrifice," he said. "When you do the math, it costs far less than hospitalization."



A man and woman wearing FFP2 masks to curb the spread of COVID-19 are seen in front of a mural depicting Santa Claus, in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Manu Fernandez

When he sees someone from the unmasked minority walking by, he keeps a distance. "They see (masks) as an affront to their freedom," D'Amico said, shrugging.

Spain reinstated its outdoor mask rule on Christmas Eve. After the 14-day contagion rate soared to 2,722 new infections per 100,000 people by the end of last week—from 40 per 100,000 in mid-October—Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez was asked whether the outdoor mask mandate

was helping.

"Of course, it is. It's not me saying it. It's science itself saying it because (it's) a virus that is contracted when one exhales," Sanchez said.

Portugal brought masks back at the end of November, after having largely dropped the requirement when it hit its goal of vaccinating 86% of the population.

Greece has also restored its outdoor mask mandate, while requiring an FFP2 or double surgical mask on public transport and in indoor public spaces.



Three elderly men wearing FFP2 face masks to curb the spread of coronavirus, sit on a bench in Athens, Greece, Monday, Jan. 3, 2022. Italy, Spain and other

European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis, File

This week, the Dutch government's outbreak management team recommended a mask mandate for people over age 13 in busy public indoor areas such as restaurants, museums and theaters, and for spectators at indoor sports events. Those places are currently closed under a lockdown until at least Jan. 14.

In France, the outdoor mask mandate was partially reinstated in December in many cities, including Paris. The age for children to start wearing masks in public places was lowered to 6 from 11.

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer announced last week that people must wear FFP2 masks outdoors if they can't keep at least two meters (6.5 feet) apart.

In Italy, with more than 2 million people currently positive for the virus in a nation of 60 million and workplace absences curtailing train and bus runs, the government also sees masks as a way to let society more fully function.



A woman wearing an FFP2 face mask to curb the spread of COVID-19 chats with a woman in a coffee bar in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Manu Fernandez

People with booster shots or recent second vaccine doses can now avoid quarantine after coming into contact with an infected person if they wear a FFP2 mask for 10 days.

The government has ordered shops to make FFP masks available for 75 euro cents (\$0.85). In the pandemic's first year, FFP2s cost up to 10 euros (\$11.50)—whenever they could be found.

Italians wear them in a palette of colors. The father of a baby baptized this week by Pope Francis in the Sistine Chapel wore one in burgundy, with matching tie and jacket pocket square. But the pontiff, who has practically shunned a mask in public, didn't wear one.

On Monday, Vatican City State mandated FFP2s in all indoor places. The tiny, walled independent state across the Tiber from the heart of Rome also stipulated that Vatican employees can go to work without quarantining after coming into contact with someone testing positive if, in addition to being fully vaccinated or having received a booster shot, they wear FFP2s.



Italian Premier Mario Draghi removes his FFP2 face mask during a press conference to explain the Government's new anti-COVID 19 measures in Rome, Monday, Jan. 10, 2022. With Italy's hospital ICUs rapidly filling up with

COVID-19 patients, most of them unvaccinated, Draghi's government issued a Christmas Eve decree that FFP2 masks – which are more protective for users than cloth or surgical face masks – must be worn used on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and local buses, trams and subways. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia



A woman wearing an FFP2 face mask looks at her phone on a subway train in Lisbon, Thursday, Jan. 6, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Armando Franca, File



A woman wearing multiple face masks walks in the Retiro park in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Bernat Armangué



Inter soccer fans wearing FFP2 face masks wait for the start of the Serie A soccer match between Inter Milan and Lazio at the San Siro Stadium, in Milan, Italy, Sunday, Jan. 9, 2022. With Italy's hospital ICUs rapidly filling up with COVID-19 patients, most of them unvaccinated, Premier Mario Draghi's government issued a Christmas Eve decree that FFP2 masks – which are more protective for users than cloth or surgical face masks – must be worn used on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and local buses, trams and subways. Credit: AP Photo/Antonio Calanni



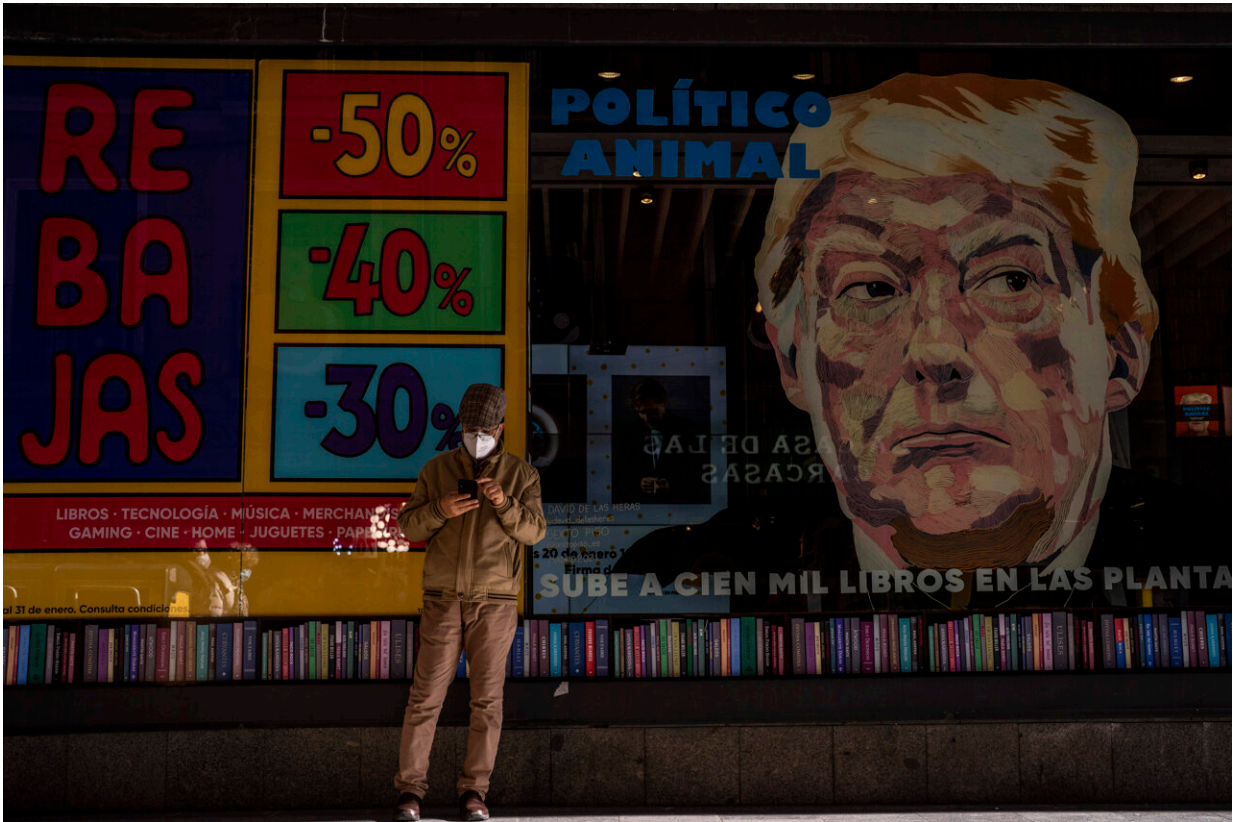
Inter soccer fans wait for the start of the Serie A soccer match between Inter Milan and Lazio at the San Siro Stadium, in Milan, Italy, Sunday, Jan. 9, 2022. With Italy's hospital ICUs rapidly filling up with COVID-19 patients, most of them unvaccinated, Premier Mario Draghi's government issued a Christmas Eve decree that FFP2 masks – which are more protective for users than cloth or surgical face masks – must be worn used on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and local buses, trams and subways. Credit: AP Photo/Antonio Calanni



Pope Francis walks with his pastoral staff among Cardinals and prelates wearing FFP2 masks at the end of an Epiphany mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, Thursday, Jan. 6, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia



A woman wearing a surgical face mask walks in downtown Barcelona, Spain, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are reinstating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti



A man wearing an FFP2 face mask to curb the spread of COVID-19 checks his smartphone in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Manu Fernandez



A man picks up a box containing FFP2 masks at the Porta Portese open air market, in Rome, Sunday, Jan. 9, 2022. With Italy's hospital ICUs rapidly filling up with COVID-19 patients, most of them unvaccinated, Premier Mario Draghi's government issued a Christmas Eve decree that FFP2 masks – which are more protective for users than cloth or surgical face masks – must be worn used on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and local buses, trams and subways. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia



Nuns wearing FFP2 masks listen to Pope Francis during his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Hall, at the Vatican, Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino, file



A woman wearing a surgical mask walks a dog in Rome, Sunday, Jan. 9, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia



A woman wearing an FFP2 face mask to curb the spread of COVID-19 walks in Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Italy, Spain and other European countries are re-instating or stiffening mask mandates as their hospitals struggle with mounting numbers of COVID-19 patients. Credit: AP Photo/Manu Fernandez

Francis did appear to be wearing a FFP2 when, startling shoppers in Rome on Tuesday evening, he emerged from a music store near the Pantheon before being driven back to the Vatican.

In Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson has focused on vaccination, masks have never been required outdoors.

This month, though, the government said secondary school students

should wear face coverings in class. But Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said that rule wouldn't apply "for a day longer than necessary."

When the British government lifted pandemic restrictions in July 2021, turning mask-wearing from a requirement to a suggestion, mask use fell markedly.

Nino Cartabellotta, president of the Bologna-based GIMBE foundation, which monitors health care in Italy, says Britain points to what can happen when measures like mask-wearing aren't valued.

"The situation in the U.K, showed that use of vaccination alone wasn't enough" to get ahead of the pandemic, even though Britain was one of the first countries to begin vaccination, he said in a video interview.

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