

# UK health service under 'extreme' strain amid omicron surge

January 5 2022, by Danica Kirka and Mike Corder

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Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures during a coronavirus media briefing in Downing Street, London, Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. Johnson sees no need for further restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus' omicron variant, his spokesman said ahead of a press conference on Tuesday. Amid indications that omicron may produce "milder" illness than earlier variants and the success of a nationwide vaccine booster program, the government believes the existing level of controls is still appropriate. Credit: Jack Hill, Pool Photo via AP

The leader of Britain's opposition Labour Party tested positive for the coronavirus and will miss the chance to grill Prime Minister Boris Johnson about the government's COVID-19 policies Wednesday as soaring infections strain the U.K. health system.

Johnson said Tuesday that the country has "a chance to ride out" the omicron variant-driven surge in infections without imposing tough lockdown measures. He is scheduled to answer questions in Parliament on Wednesday afternoon and to deliver a statement on COVID-19.

A party spokesperson said Labour leader Keir Starmer would miss the session after testing positive for the virus.

Confirmed new daily infections across the U.K. jumped to a record 218,274 on Tuesday, 15% more than the previous high set Dec. 31. However, inconsistent reporting during the holiday period may have inflated the daily figures.

A string of National Health Service local organizations have declared "critical incidents" in recent days amid staff shortages. Hospitals in the Greater Manchester region said they would pause some non-urgent surgeries amid the rising impact of COVID-19 and worker absences.

Gillian Keegan, a junior minister at the U.K. Ministry of Health, acknowledged the strain in an interview with BBC Breakfast.

"Right now, they are under [extreme pressure](#) with the omicron variant, with the number of positive cases and the increase in hospitalizations, and at this point in (winter) time when they always have extreme pressure," Keegan said.

The Daily Telegraph reported Wednesday that the British government is considering relaxing testing procedures to allow people who tested positive to return to work more quickly. The paper said that people who test positive using rapid lateral flow tests would only have to take a follow-up PCR test if they have symptoms.

The move would effectively shorten the time people without symptoms have to self-isolate.

Keegan did not confirm the report but told the BBC, "What we are doing all the time is looking at what makes sense. We don't need to do things that are unnecessary."

NHS Confederation chief executive Matthew Taylor told the BBC he would support the move if scientists deem it safe.

"Hospitals who have declared critical incidents, for example, are essentially reaching out to staff who are on leave, on rest days or even recently retired and asking them to come back to wards, so the situation is desperate," Taylor said. "Any way of getting staff back into hospital is a good thing."

An ambulance service in northeast England began advising patients with non-life-threatening conditions over the New Year's weekend to ask a relative drive them to a hospital as waiting times for ambulances rose due to staff shortages and extra demand.

"It is still taking us too long to get an ambulance to patients. Unfortunately, due to this, patients remain at risk, which is unacceptable," North East Ambulance Service medical director Mathew Beattie said Wednesday.

He stressed, however, that "we would never ask anyone to drive

themselves to hospital with a life-threatening illness."

Opposition politicians and some public health experts have pressed the government to tighten restrictions on business and personal interactions as omicron sweeps across the country. Johnson has resisted their calls after almost 100 of his party's lawmakers opposed mask requirements and other infection-control measures imposed last month.

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Citation: UK health service under 'extreme' strain amid omicron surge (2022, January 5)  
retrieved 19 April 2024 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-uk-health-extreme-strain-omicron.html>

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