

New turning point? More countries easing COVID restrictions

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Passengers stand at the Noerreport Metrostation in Copenhagen Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Denmark has become one of the first European Union countries to scrap most pandemic restrictions as the country no longer considers the COVID-19 outbreak "a socially critical disease." Bit by bit, many countries that have been especially hard-hit by the coronavirus are easing their tough, and often unpopular, restrictive measures to fight COVID-19 even as the omicron variant—deemed less severe—has caused cases to skyrocket. Credit: Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

Late-night disco partying. Elbow-to-elbow seating in movie theaters. Mask-free bearing of faces in public, especially in Europe and North America: Bit by bit, many countries that have been hard-hit by the coronavirus are opening up and easing their tough, and often unpopular, restrictive measures aimed to fight COVID-19 even as the omicron variant—deemed less severe—has caused cases to skyrocket.

The early moves to relax such restrictions evoke a new turning point in a nearly two-year pandemic that has been full of them.

Omicron, the Geneva-based World Health Organization says, has fueled more cases—90 million—in the world over the last 10 weeks than during all of 2020, the outbreak's first full year. WHO acknowledges some countries can judiciously consider easing the rules if they boast high immunity rates, strong health care systems and favorable epidemiological curves.

Omicron is less likely to cause [severe illness](#) than the previous delta variant, according to studies. Omicron spreads even more easily than other coronavirus strains, and has already become dominant in many countries. It also more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had previously been infected by prior versions of the virus.

But the U.N. health agency, ever leery about how a virus still spreading widely might evolve, warned about underestimating omicron.

"We are concerned that a narrative has taken hold in some countries that because of vaccines—and because of omicron's high transmissibility and lower severity—preventing transmission is no longer possible and no longer necessary," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said at a regular WHO briefing on the pandemic on Tuesday. "Nothing could be

further from the truth."

His emergencies chief, Dr. Michael Ryan, said some countries could justifiably begin easing restrictions, but warned about a rush to the exits and advised that countries assess their own situations. He cautioned that "political pressure will result in people in some countries opening prematurely—and that will result in unnecessary transmission, unnecessary severe disease, and unnecessary death."

The most pronounced pullbacks are popping up in Europe, for many months the world's epicenter of the pandemic, as well as in South Africa—where omicron was first announced publicly—and the United States, which has tallied both the most cases and deaths from COVID-19 of any single country.

Britain, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and several Nordic countries have taken steps to end or ease their COVID-19 restrictions.



Customers at the fish market in Torvehallerne in Copenhagen, Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Starting Tuesday, it is no longer mandatory to wear protection mask anywhere in public in Denmark. The Danish Government decided that COVID-19 is no longer categorized as a socially critical disease after 31 January 2022, and has lifted COVID restrictions. Bit by bit, many countries that have been especially hard-hit by the coronavirus are easing their tough, and often unpopular, restrictive measures to fight COVID-19 even as the omicron variant—deemed less severe—has caused cases to skyrocket. Credit: Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

Last week, England ended almost all domestic restrictions: Masks aren't required in public and vaccine passes are no longer needed to get into events or other public venues, while the work-from-home order has been lifted. One lingering condition: Those who test positive still have to self-

isolate.

On Tuesday, Norway lifted its ban on serving alcohol after 11 p.m. and the cap on private gatherings to no more than 10 people. Travelers arriving at the border no longer will be required to take a COVID-19 test before entry. People can sit elbow-to-elbow again at events with fixed seating, and sports events can take place as they did in pre-pandemic times.

"Now it's time for us to take back our everyday life," Norwegian Health Minister Ingvild Kjerkol said Tuesday. "Tonight, we scrap most measures so we can be closer to living a normal life."

As throughout the pandemic, many countries are going their own way: Italy has tightened its health pass requirements during the omicron surge. From Monday, its government requires at least a negative test within the previous 48 hours to enter banks and post offices, and anyone over age 50 who hasn't been vaccinated risks a 100-euro fine.

Other continents are being even more cautious. Some of the world's highest vaccination rates are found in Asia—which is no stranger to earlier outbreaks like SARS and MERS—and its leaders are holding to stricter lockdown measures or even tightening them, for now.

The Pacific Rim nation of Tonga was entering a lockdown Wednesday evening after finding coronavirus infections in two port workers helping distribute aid arriving after a volcanic eruption and tsunami. That came against fears that the fallout from the natural disaster last month could spark a second disaster by bringing the pandemic into a nation that had been virus-free.

On the eve of hosting the Winter Olympics, China was sticking to its formal zero-COVID-19 policy even as 85% of its population is fully

vaccinated, according to Our World in Data figures. Beijing imposes strict lockdowns and quarantines quickly when any cases are detected, and continue to require people to wear masks on public transportation and show with "green" status on a health app to enter most restaurants and stores.

Thailand, where 69% of the population is fully vaccinated, according to Our World in Data, continues to require masks be worn in public and enforces social distancing, as well as other restrictions.

Singapore, which boasts Asia's highest rate of vaccination with 87% with at least two shots, is maintaining its restrictions even as it heads along a "transition journey to a COVID-19 resilient nation" begun in August, with steps to both relax and tighten rules as conditions warrant.

With nearly 80% of its people fully vaccinated, Japan has resisted mandated restrictions but continues exhorting the public to wear face masks and observe social distancing practices, while requesting restaurants to shorten opening hours. Cambodia, with 81% of its people vaccinated, has dropped restrictions on restaurants and other businesses but still requires masks to be work in public and encourages social distancing.

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