

Denmark unmask to 'live normally' again with Omicron

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The easing of restrictions comes as Denmark registers around 40,000-50,000 new Covid cases a day, or almost one percent of the population.

Denmark waved goodbye to facemasks and health passes Tuesday as it became the first European Union country to lift all of its domestic Covid

curbs despite record numbers of cases of the milder Omicron variant.

Only a few restrictions remain in place at the country's borders, for unvaccinated travellers arriving from non-Schengen countries.

After a first attempt at lifting restrictions between September and November, the Scandinavian country once again ditched its Covid checks and limited opening hours for bars and restaurants.

"For me, the best part is that we don't need to wear masks anymore," Natalia Chechetkina, a receptionist in Copenhagen, told AFP.

"At least now we have a choice—if we want to protect ourselves or we want to feel free."

Marie Touflet, a 23-year-old French student in the capital, said it was "pretty strange to take the metro without a mask, compared to France".

"It's really nice to be able to see people's faces and it feels like we're living normally again," she said.

The easing comes as Denmark registers around 40,000-50,000 new Covid cases a day, or almost one percent of the country's 5.8 million inhabitants.

Health officials believe those figures will soon start going down.

"There are strong indications that the infection has peaked in the areas where it has been most pronounced," Tyra Krause of Denmark's public health and research institution SSI told news agency Ritzau.

"So it's super good timing for the restrictions to be eased."

'Shift of responsibility'

More than 60 percent of Danes have received a third dose of a Covid-19 vaccine—one month ahead of health authorities' schedule—compared to an EU average of just under 45 percent.

Including those who have recently had Covid, health authorities estimate that 80 percent of the population is protected against severe forms of the disease.

"With Omicron not being a severe disease for the vaccinated, we believe it is reasonable to lift restrictions," epidemiologist Lone Simonsen of the University of Roskilde told AFP.

Two years after the start of the pandemic, the Danish strategy enjoys broad support at home.

In a poll published Monday by daily Politiken, 64 percent of Danes surveyed said they had faith in the government's Covid policy, while the lifting of restrictions also has widespread support in parliament.

Going forward, Danes are being urged to exercise personal responsibility.



Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen last week said Denmark would return "to life as we knew it before corona"

"Without a Covid pass there will be a shift of responsibility," Simonsen said.

Danes have increasingly used home tests to detect infection, but these are now being phased out and instead, anyone with symptoms is advised to stay home.

The Danish Health Authority currently "recommends" those who test positive to isolate for four days, while contact cases no longer need to quarantine.

Facemasks and the Covid pass are also recommended for hospital visits.

Denmark lifted restrictions as the World Health Organization chief Tuesday warned it was too early for countries to either declare victory over Covid-19 or give up attempts to halt transmission.

'Bit of an experiment'

One of the rare critics in Denmark was the country's Gout Association.

"We think it's important to continue using masks as long as the infection is spreading widely," association director Mette Bryde Lind told Ritzau.

Eskild Petersen, an infectious disease specialist, said the Danish strategy was "a bit of an experiment".

"I would have liked for us to wait 10-14 days after changing quarantine rules before abandoning masks and opening up nightlife" again, he told public television broadcaster TV2.

The government said it does not expect to have to revert to new closures but has remained cautious.

"We can't provide any guarantees when it comes to biology," Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said last week, announcing the country's return "to life as we knew it before corona".

This is the second time Denmark has tried to return to a pre-pandemic lifestyle.

On September 10, the country lifted all its restrictions before reintroducing some in November.

Museums, cinemas and theatre and concert venues then closed over Christmas and the New Year.

According to the World Health Organization, 73 percent of the European population has contracted Covid-19 at least once since January 2020.

Faced with a lower level of hospitalisations than in previous waves, several European countries have announced a reduction of their restrictions, despite record or very high cases.

"Populations in most countries have reached high levels of immunity, from vaccines or natural illness", Simonsen said.

"This is how it ends."

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