

Dutch to go 'back to normal' as COVID curbs scrapped

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The Netherlands said Tuesday it will drop almost all coronavirus restrictions, the latest European country to try to return to normal despite still-high Omicron variant infections.

Dutch bars, restaurants and nightclubs will go back to pre-pandemic opening hours and health passes will be scrapped by February 25, the health minister said.

Social distancing and face masks will no longer be obligatory in most places, while the quarantine period for those with COVID-19 will be shortened to five days.

"The country will open again," Health Minister Ernst Kuipers told a press conference.

He warned however that while "we seem to be over the peak", the pandemic was "not over".

"We can be optimistic but we also have to be realistic," he said.

The Netherlands imposed some of Europe's toughest measures in December to curb a surge in Omicron infections but has phased some out in recent weeks.

It will now join countries including Denmark and Norway in dropping most restrictions.

The Netherlands, with a population of 17 million, recorded a huge 482,695 positive tests last week but the figure was down 22 percent on the previous week.

Seventy-eight people died and 88 were in intensive care.

Limits on the number of guests people can have at home will end immediately, while people will be advised to work from home for only half the week, Kuipers said.

Nightclubs and bars can open until 1am from this Friday, before all limits on opening hours are scrapped the following Friday.

"Young people should be able to unleash their wings," said Kuipers.

"We will go back to normal closing times we had before corona."

People will still need tests for events with more than 500 people.

From February 25, keeping 1.5 metres from other people and mask wearing will "remain sensible, but there is no obligation," with masks required only on public transport and in airports, he said.

Travel bans for several non-EU countries will also be dropped but travellers from EU nations must still show proof of vaccination or a negative test for now.

The health minister took office as part of Prime Minister Mark Rutte's new government in January and quickly signalled that he wanted to start getting society back to normal.

The Netherlands suffered two spates of rioting in 2021 over coronavirus restrictions, with police shooting and injuring several protesters in Rotterdam in November.

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