

# France lifts Covid restrictions as case numbers ease

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France on Wednesday loosened several of the restrictions imposed to curb the latest COVID-19 surge, with authorities hoping a recent decline in daily cases will soon ease pressure on overburdened hospitals.

The move has divided experts after authorities reported record coronavirus infections just last month, with critics accusing the government of making a hasty bet on a return to normality.

But President Emmanuel Macron is betting that widespread vaccinations will curb the pandemic, with proof of inoculation now required for the health pass used to access everything from bars and restaurants to cinemas and long-distance public transport.

The government says more than 90 percent of adults are vaccinated, and booster shots or proof of recovery from COVID will be required to retain the new health pass—a recent negative test result is no longer accepted.

From Wednesday, wearing face masks outdoors will no longer be mandatory, and audience capacity limits have been lifted for theatres, concerts, sporting matches and other events.

"It was about time," nurse Ludovic told AFP in central Paris. "I don't see much point wearing masks outdoors, even if you have to be careful inside."

"I've been waiting for this," said Eric, another Parisian. "It's been weeks that I've been waiting, so it's great news".

Working from home is also no longer required, though it remains strongly recommended.

A second stage of easing is set for February 16, when nightclubs can reopen after being shut in December, and standing areas will again be allowed at concerts, sporting events and bars.

Eating and drinking will also be permitted in stadiums, cinemas and

public transport from that date.

Macron also suggested in a press interview published Tuesday that restrictions imposed for schools, which include face mask requirements, could be eased after the winter breaks scheduled for later this month.

## **Cautious optimism**

Authorities view the threat of the Omicron variant as less dangerous than previous strains of the virus, even though it is more contagious.

"We have seen a weak reversal of the trend over the past few days, with fewer cases declared each day than seven days earlier," government spokesman Gabriel Attal told France Info radio Tuesday.

An average of 322,256 cases were recorded over the previous seven days, according to latest figures, down from 366,179 a week ago.

Attal called it a "very encouraging signal" but said officials "remain cautious" because of a "very contagious" sub-variant of Omicron, BA.1, that appears to have delayed the peak of infections in other countries.

France also still has some 3,750 COVID patients in intensive care, above the government's target of 3,000, and on average the country is seeing 261 COVID deaths at hospitals every day.

"We've clearly passed the peak, we hope the decline will be quick. But we're coming from stratospheric levels, so this wave is still far from over," the epidemiologist Mahmoud Zureik told French newspaper Le Parisien on Wednesday.

As of Tuesday, France had recorded 131,312 COVID deaths since the beginning of the outbreak.

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