

S. Korea keeps crowd limits as omicron causes 25-fold spike

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Medical workers stand to guide people as they wait for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Friday, Feb. 18, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

South Korea will extend restaurant dining hours but maintain a six-

person limit on private social gatherings as it wrestles with a massive coronavirus wave driven by the highly infectious omicron variant.

The 109,831 new cases reported on Friday was another record and about a 25-fold increase from the levels seen in mid-January, when omicron became the country's dominant strain. The more than 516,000 infections counted in the past seven days alone raised South Korea's caseload to over 1.75 million.

Long lines snaked around public health offices and testing stations in the densely populated capital Seoul, where [health workers](#) in hazmat suits distributed rapid antigen test kits and collected throat and nasal samples from senior citizens and other high-risk groups.

There's also concern that campaigning for the March 9 presidential election could worsen transmissions. Thousands of supporters packed a rally in the southwestern city of Suncheon by ruling party candidate Lee Jae-myung, where they clapped, shouted and chanted his name. Lee's conservative opponent Yoon Suk Yeol also drew huge crowds during a rally in the southeastern city of Sangju.

Omicron has so far seemed less likely to cause serious illness or death than the delta variant, which hit the country hard in December and January. But cases are growing much faster and appear to be putting the country on a verge of a possible hospital surge.



People wait for coronavirus tests outside a public health center in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, Seoul's No. 2 official behind President Moon Jae-in, acknowledged people's frustration with extended virus restrictions and the shock on service sector businesses, but said officials couldn't afford to ease social distancing significantly when hospitalizations and deaths are starting to creep up.

Officials did extend the curfew on restaurants and other businesses from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. but private social gatherings of seven or more people will continue to be prohibited at least through March 13.

People will continue to be required to show their vaccination status

through smartphone apps or documents to enter potentially crowded spaces like restaurants, coffee shops, gyms and karaoke venues.

"Experts are expecting the (omicron outbreak) to peak sometime between late February and March," Kim said during a meeting on anti-virus strategies. "When we reach a point where we could confirm the (outbreak) has peaked and was in decline, we will start meaningfully easing social distancing measures like other nations so that people could go back to their precious normal lives."



People wait for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Friday, Feb. 18, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon



Medical workers guide people as they wait for their coronavirus tests outside a public health center in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

The Health Ministry said about 30% of intensive care units designated for COVID-19 treatment are currently occupied. The ministry said 385 virus patients were in serious or critical condition, which was 100 more than a week earlier but still lower than the levels of around 1,000 seen in late December during a delta outbreak.

While omicron more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had COVID-19 previously, experts say vaccination and booster shots still provide strong protection from serious illness and death.

More than 86% of South Koreans have been fully vaccinated and 58% have received booster shots. Health officials started offering fourth vaccination shots at nursing homes and other long-term care settings this week.

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