

S. Korea drops proof of vaccine, test to aid virus response

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People wearing face masks to help protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk at the Cheonggye Stream in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 28, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

South Korea will no longer require people to show proof of vaccination or negative tests to enter any indoor space starting Tuesday, removing a

key preventive measure during a fast-developing omicron surge that's elevating hospitalizations and deaths.

The Health Ministry's announcement on Monday came as the country set another one-day record in COVID-19 deaths with 114, breaking the previous high of 112 set on Saturday. More than 710 COVID-19 patients were in critical or serious conditions, up from 200-300 in mid-February, while nearly half of the country's intensive care units designated for COVID-19 were occupied.

Park Hyang, a senior [health ministry](#) official, said rescinding the "anti-epidemic pass" would free more [health workers](#) to help monitor nearly 800,000 virus patients with mild or moderate symptoms who have been asked to isolate at home to save hospital space.

About 250,000 people per day in the past week received free rapid antigen tests at public health offices and testing stations. According to the ministry, about half of those came for 24-hour proofs of negative tests.

Since December, adults had been required to show their vaccination status through smartphone apps or present a proof of negative tests to enter potentially crowded spaces like restaurants, coffee shops, gyms and karaoke venues.

But the policy had already been challenged by local court rulings in cities such as Daegu, where a district judge last week ruled the measures as excessive for people in their 50s and younger. He cited that the government has shifted the focus of its anti-virus campaign toward [high-risk groups](#), including people in their 60s or older and those with preexisting [medical conditions](#).

"We had considered the need to focus our limited public health

resources to testing high-risk groups and managing people who already tested positive. ... There had also been regional confusion following court rulings," Park said during a briefing.

She said authorities have no plans to reintroduce the anti-epidemic pass unless the pandemic undergoes another major change, such as the emergence of new coronavirus variant.



A huge electric screen showing precautions against the coronavirus is seen in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 28, 2022. The sign reads "Follow quarantine rules." Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

"While the anti-epidemic pass has been halted, we ask for people in their

60s or older and unvaccinated people to exercise even more caution than before," Park added, saying omicron would be potentially dangerous to them.

Omicron has so far seemed less likely to cause serious illness or death than the delta strain that hit the country hard in December and early January. But [hospitalizations and deaths are beginning to rise amid a greater scale of outbreak](#) that is stretching worn-out health and public workers.

The country has been forced to reshape its pandemic response in a way that effectively tolerates the virus' spread among the broader population while concentrating medical resources to protect priority groups.

Officials have rapidly expanded at-home treatments while significantly easing quarantine restrictions. The country has also reshaped its testing policy around rapid antigen test kits, despite concerns over their accuracy and propensity for false-negative results, to save laboratory tests mostly for priority groups.

Many South Koreans are wary of the bend-but-not-break approach as the country continues to report some of the world's highest daily infection numbers, including 139,626 on Monday.

There seems to be limited political capacity to strengthen social distancing ahead of the March 9 presidential election, given people's fatigue and frustration with extended restrictions and the strain on service sector businesses.

Despite the growing outbreak, officials earlier this month extended restaurant dining hours by an hour to 10 p.m., although they have so far maintained a six-person limit on private social gatherings.

More than 86% of the country's population of more than 51 million are fully vaccinated and around 61% have received booster shots.

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