

Omicron forces S. Korea to end GPS monitoring, some checkups

February 7 2022, by Kim Tong-Hyung



A medical worker guides people as they wait for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 7, 2022. South Korea will no longer use GPS monitoring to enforce quarantines and will also end daily checkup calls to low-risk coronavirus patients as a fast-developing omicron surge overwhelms health and government workers. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

South Korea will no longer use GPS monitoring to enforce quarantines and will also end daily checkup calls to low-risk coronavirus patients as a fast-developing omicron surge overwhelms health and government workers.

The speed of transmissions has made it impossible to maintain a tight and proactive medical response, Jeong Eun-kyeong, the country's top infectious disease expert, said Monday.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency reported 38,691 new cases of the virus, a nine-fold increase from the levels seen in mid-January, when omicron became the country's dominant strain. Jeong said the country may see daily jumps of 130,000 or 170,000 by late February.

South Korea had been seen as a success story during the earlier part of the pandemic after it contained infections and hospitalizations more effectively than most countries in the West. Health authorities worked closely with biotech companies to ramp up laboratory tests and aggressively mobilized technological tools and public workers to trace contacts and enforce quarantines.

But the country's strengths have been rendered irrelevant by the unprecedented spike in infections fueled by the omicron variant, which has stretched health and administrative resources.



People wait for their coronavirus test at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 7, 2022. South Korea will no longer use GPS monitoring to enforce quarantines and will also end daily checkup calls to low-risk coronavirus patients as a fast-developing omicron surge overwhelms health and government workers. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

Officials had already been forced to expand at-home treatments, reduce quarantine periods, and reshape testing policy around rapid antigen test kits, despite concerns over their reliability, to save [laboratory tests](#) for people in their 60s or older and those with existing medical conditions who are at higher risk for serious illness.

The plans to further ease the monitoring and quarantines came as health and public workers struggle to keep up with the near 150,000 people

being treated at home for mild or moderate symptoms, which have led to delays in drug prescriptions and has paralyzed contact tracing.

Officials say public workers who had been monitoring virus carriers through GPS-enabled smartphone apps will now be assigned to help with at-home treatments. Virus carriers will no longer be required to report to local [health](#) offices when they leave home to visit doctors, while their cohabiting family members can now freely go out to buy food, medicine and other essentials.



South Korean prospective soldiers wearing face masks wait to receive a medical checkup at the Seoul office of the Military Manpower Administration in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 7, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

Low-risk virus carriers, who are in their 50s or younger and have no pre-existing medical conditions, will now be left to monitor their conditions on their own and contact local hospitals if their symptoms worsen. Health workers will still make daily checkup calls to people in their 60s and older or those with pre-existing [medical conditions](#).

"We are planning to transition toward an anti-virus strategy that's concentrated on maintaining essential social functions while dealing with huge numbers of infections and people placed under quarantine," Jeong, the KDCA's commissioner, said during a government briefing.

While omicron is spreading much faster than previous versions of the virus, the rates of hospitalization and death have so far been lower than cases linked to delta, which drove a devastating surge in December and early January.



South Korean prospective soldiers wearing face masks have their blood taken during a medical checkup at the Seoul office of the Military Manpower Administration in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 7, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon



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South Korean prospective soldiers wearing face masks wait to receive a medical checkup at the Seoul office of the Military Manpower Administration in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 7, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon



A South Korean prospective soldier wearing a face mask undergoes an eye exam during a medical checkup at the Seoul office of the Military Manpower Administration in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 7, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

The KDCA said 270 patients were in serious or critical conditions as of Monday, while less than 46% of the country's intensive care units designated for COVID-19 treatment were occupied. Still, experts say the country's rapidly growing caseload is likely to drive up hospitalizations in coming weeks.

As of Monday, 86% of a population of more than 51 million people have been fully vaccinated and nearly 55% have received booster shots.

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