

# Germany to let virus restrictions expire even as cases surge

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Danilo Schulz sits during a Corona quick test at the Johanniter Corona Test Center in the Palace of Culture in Dresden, Germany, Wednesday, March 16, 2022. Credit: Sebastian Kahnert/dpa via AP

The German government on Thursday defended its decision to let many pandemic restrictions expire at the weekend, even as the country hit a

new record high for newly confirmed cases.

Germany's disease control agency reported 294,931 new cases in the past 24 hours. The Robert Koch Institute said there have been a further 278 COVID-related deaths, taking the overall toll since the start of the pandemic to 126,420.

"We are now entering a new phase of the pandemic in which we, like almost all of our neighboring countries, can do without most of the protective measures," Chancellor Olaf Scholz said after a meeting with Germany's 16 state governors.

The decision to end many pandemic restrictions on Sunday, including the requirements to wear masks in public settings and limit spectators in stadiums, was criticized by the states, who can still introduce their own restrictions in virus hotspots going forward.

Germany's powerful industry lobby group BDI had also warned against a "generous" lifting of measures, saying it would be irresponsible in light of the current surge in infections.

Experts say mobility data show people are increasingly meeting others, facilitating the spread of the virus. The surge is also fueled by the highly transmissible omicron subvariant known as BA.2 that now makes up more than half of all cases in Germany. Past easing of rules and reports about similar action in other countries have also conveyed a mistaken impression that the pandemic is over.

Meanwhile, German lawmakers debated proposals for a general COVID-19 vaccine mandate for all adults, which Scholz has backed. Opponents of the measure have suggested mandatory vaccination only for people over 50, while others reject the idea altogether.

A final decision on making vaccinations compulsory isn't expected for several weeks.

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