

Top China expert says COVID 'spreading rapidly' after rules easing

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One of China's top health experts has warned of a surge in COVID-19 cases, state media said Sunday, in the wake of the government's decision to abandon its hardline coronavirus strategy.

Shops and restaurants in Beijing are deserted as the country awaits a

spike in infections following the decision to reduce the scope of mandatory testing, allow some positive cases to quarantine at home and end large-scale lockdowns.

Top epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan told [state media](#) in an interview published Sunday that the Omicron strain of the virus prevalent in China was highly transmissible and could lead to a surge in cases.

"The (current) Omicron mutation... is very contagious... one person can transmit to 22 people," said Zhong—a leading advisor to the government throughout the pandemic.

"Currently, the epidemic in China is... spreading rapidly, and under such circumstances, no matter how strong the prevention and control is, it will be difficult to completely cut off the transmission chain."

The easing of China's so-called "zero-COVID" policy followed nationwide protests against harsh virus rules that had battered the economy and confined millions to their homes.

But the country is now facing a surge of cases it is ill-prepared to handle, with millions of elderly still not fully vaccinated and underfunded hospitals lacking the capacity to take on huge numbers of patients.

The country has one intensive care unit bed for 10,000 people, Jiao Yahui, director of the Department of Medical Affairs at the National Health Commission, warned Friday.

She said 106,000 doctors and 177,700 nurses will be redirected to intensive care units to cope with the spike in coronavirus patients, but did not offer details on how this would affect the health system's ability to treat other diseases.

'I'm afraid to step out'

Long lines sprung up outside pharmacies in Beijing on Sunday as residents rushed to stockpile cold and fever medicines and antigen test kits.

Some told AFP they were ordering drugs from pharmacies in nearby cities.

"I've asked my family in Shijiazhuang to courier fever medicine because nearby pharmacies don't have stocks," said Julie Jiang, a Beijing resident.

Dozens of restaurants and [small businesses](#) in Beijing put up signs saying they were "temporarily closed", without offering details.

Several major online grocery and food delivery platforms including Meituan, Fresh Hippo and Ding Dong were struggling to operate in Beijing without enough delivery drivers.

"I'm afraid to step out," said Liu Cheng, a mother of two [young children](#) living in central Beijing's Jianguomen area.

"Many of my friends with COVID symptoms have tested positive when self testing, but they haven't reported this to the authorities or gone to the hospital."

Official caseloads in China have dropped sharply in the wake of the government's decision to scrap routine mass testing, with only special groups including [healthcare workers](#) and delivery drivers exempt from the rules.

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