

# China to end quarantine on arrival in fresh COVID rule relaxation

December 27 2022

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China said Monday it would scrap mandatory quarantine on arrival, further unwinding years of strict virus controls as the country battles a surge in cases.

Having mostly cut itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic, China is now experiencing an unprecedented surge in infections after abruptly lifting restrictions that torpedoed the economy and sparked nationwide protests.

And in a sudden end to nearly three years of strict border controls, Beijing said late Monday it would scrap mandatory quarantines for overseas travellers.

Since March 2020, all passengers arriving in China have had to undergo mandatory centralised quarantine. This decreased from three weeks to one week this summer, and to five days last month.

But under new rules that will take effect January 8, when COVID-19 will be downgraded to a Class B infectious disease from Class A, they will no longer need to.

"According to the national health quarantine law, infectious disease quarantine measures will no longer be taken against inbound travellers and goods," the National Health Commission (NHC) said.

The move is likely to be greeted with joy from Chinese citizens and diaspora unable to return and see relatives for much of the pandemic.

But it comes as China faces a wave of cases that studies have estimated could kill around one million people over the next few months.

Many are now grappling with shortages of medicine, while emergency [medical facilities](#) are strained by an influx of undervaccinated elderly patients.

"At present, COVID-19 prevention and control in China are facing a new situation and new tasks," President Xi Jinping said in a directive Monday, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

"We should launch the patriotic health campaign in a more targeted way... fortify a community line of defence for epidemic prevention and control, and effectively protect people's lives, safety and health," he said.

## **'Impossible' to track**

Hospitals and crematoriums across the country have been overflowing with COVID patients and victims, while the NHC on Sunday announced it would stop publishing daily nationwide infection and death statistics.

That decision followed concerns that the country's wave of infections is not being accurately reflected in official statistics.

Beijing has admitted the scale of the outbreak has become "impossible" to track following the end of mandatory mass testing.

And last week, the government narrowed the criteria by which COVID-19 fatalities were counted—a move experts said would suppress the number of deaths attributable to the virus.

The winter surge comes ahead of two major public holidays next month, in which millions of people are expected to travel to their hometowns to

reunite with relatives.

Authorities are expecting the virus to hit under-resourced rural areas hard, and on Monday called for the guaranteed supply of drugs and [medical treatment](#) during New Year's Day and late January's week-long Lunar New Year holiday.

In recent days, [health officials](#) in the wealthy coastal province Zhejiang estimated that one million residents were being infected per day.

The coastal city of Qingdao also predicted roughly 500,000 new daily infections and the southern manufacturing city of Dongguan eyed up to 300,000.

Unofficial surveys and modelling based on search engine terms suggest that the wave may have already peaked in some major cities like Beijing and Chongqing.

A poll of over 150,000 residents of the southwestern province of Sichuan organised by disease control officials showed that 63 percent had tested positive for COVID, and estimated that infections peaked Friday.

Only six COVID deaths have been officially reported since Beijing unwound most of its restrictions earlier this month.

But crematorium workers interviewed by AFP have reported an unusually high influx of bodies, while hospitals have said they are tallying multiple fatalities per day, as emergency wards fill up.

The main funeral service centre in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou postponed all ceremonies until January 10 to focus on cremations due to the "large workload", according to a notice published

online Sunday.

China's censors and mouthpieces have been working overtime to spin the decision to scrap strict travel curbs, quarantines and snap lockdowns as a victory, even as cases soar.

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Citation: China to end quarantine on arrival in fresh COVID rule relaxation (2022, December 27)  
retrieved 23 April 2024 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-12-china-quarantine-fresh-covid.html>

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