

China faces soaring Covid cases as hardline policy eases

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COVID cases are surging in the Chinese capital, officials said Monday, as the country navigates a rapid turn away from its zero-tolerance coronavirus strategy.

Just a few days after China began loosening restrictions, Beijing authorities said more than 22,000 patients had visited hospitals across

the city in the previous day—16 times the number a week ago.

"The current trend of the rapid spread of the epidemic in Beijing still exists," said city health commission spokesman Li Ang at a briefing Monday.

"The number of fever clinic visits and flu-like cases increased significantly, and the number of... [emergency calls](#) increased sharply."

China reported 8,626 domestic infections Monday but with testing no longer mandatory for much of the population the number is believed to be a lot higher.

As the country steers a tricky path out of its zero-COVID policy towards living with the virus, many with symptoms have opted to self-medicate at home.

Cold and fever medicines have sold out in virtually all pharmacies across Beijing, and rapid antigen tests are dwindling as people stock up in anticipation of a virus surge that threatens the lives of millions of unvaccinated elderly.

Social media users reported a surge of infections in smaller cities including Baoding in Hebei province and Dazhou in Sichuan, with hospitals inundated and residents unable to buy medicines.

AFP was not immediately able to verify the claims.

"It's really serious, the supply of medicine is not enough and it's being managed badly," wrote one person on the Twitter-like platform Weibo.

Lacking adequate medical infrastructure and primary care triage, China's rural interior is particularly vulnerable to health crises such as COVID.

'End of an era'

In a major move towards unwinding years of hardline restrictions, China said Monday it would retire an app used to track travel to areas with infections.

The state-run "Communications Itinerary Card" was a central part of zero-COVID, keeping tabs on the movements of millions through their phone signal data.

It was one of a panoply of tracking apps that have governed everyday life through the pandemic. Most people still use local "health codes" run by their city or province to enter shops and offices.

Social media users hailed the retirement of the software, noting the symbolism of the government shutting down its main tracking app.

"Bye bye, this announces the end of an era, and also welcomes a brand new one," one person wrote on Weibo.

Others asked what would become of the mountains of data collected and hoped it would be deleted.

'Spreading rapidly'

Kendra Schaefer, tech partner at research consultancy Trivium China, said the "political win of returning to normalcy is ginormous".

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

China has one intensive care unit bed per 10,000 people, Jiao Yahui, director of the Department of Medical Affairs at the National Health Commission, warned last week.

The official number of COVID cases has dropped sharply from an all-time high recorded last month, but top Chinese health expert Zhong Nanshan warned in state media Sunday that the Omicron variant was "spreading rapidly".

The easing of restrictions has also released pent-up demand for domestic travel, with state broadcaster CCTV saying Monday that flights from Beijing's two main airports were expected to soon return to 70 percent of 2019 levels.

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