

China says tracking COVID cases 'impossible' as infections soar

December 14 2022



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China's top health body said Wednesday the true scale of coronavirus infections in the country is now "impossible" to track, with officials warning cases are rising rapidly in Beijing after the government abruptly abandoned its zero-COVID policy.

Beijing's decision to scrap mass testing and quarantines after nearly three years of attempting to stamp out the virus has led to a corresponding drop in officially reported infections, which hit an all-time high only last month.

But those numbers no longer reflected reality because testing is no longer required for much of the country, China's National Health Commission (NHC) acknowledged on Wednesday.

"Many asymptomatic people are no longer participating in nucleic acid testing, so it is impossible to accurately grasp the actual number of asymptomatic infected people," the NHC said in a statement Wednesday.

That came after Vice Premier Sun Chunlan said new infections in the capital were "rapidly growing".

Chinese leaders are determined to press ahead even though the country is facing a surge in cases that experts fear it is ill-equipped to manage. Millions of vulnerable elderly are still not fully vaccinated and underfunded hospitals lack the resources to deal with an influx of infected patients.

Authorities said on Wednesday they would begin allowing some vulnerable groups, including those 60 and older, to receive a second booster shot six months after their first.

A line of about 50 people stretched out the door of a fever clinic in Beijing on Wednesday, with multiple residents telling AFP they were infected with COVID.

"Basically, if we are lining up here, we are all infected. We would not come here if we weren't," one person waiting in line said.

"I'm here with a senior member of my family, he's had a fever for nearly 10 days in a row now, so we are coming to do a checkup on him."

Beijing struggles

Restaurants, shops and parks are now allowed to reopen but residents are not finding the path to living with the virus straightforward.

Many with symptoms have opted to self-medicate at home, while others are staying in to protect themselves from getting infected.

Businesses are also struggling as COVID-19 rips through the population and hits their staffing.

As a result, the capital's streets are largely empty.

"Basically I follow the requirements of the Beijing government, that the elderly should stay home and go out as little as possible," said one resident in his 80s who declined to give his name.

He said he wasn't too worried because he thought Omicron was mild but told AFP he thought "there shouldn't be complete relaxation and freedom".

"If we are dead, how can we be free, right?" he said.

Residents have complained of sold-out cold medicines and long lines at pharmacies, while Chinese search giant Baidu said searches for fever-reducing Ibuprofen had risen 430 percent over the past week.

Soaring demand for rapid antigen tests and medications has created a black market with astronomical prices, while buyers resort to sourcing the goods from "dealers" whose contacts are being passed around

WeChat groups.

Authorities are cracking down, with market regulators hitting one business in Beijing with a 300,000 yuan (\$43,000) fine for selling overpriced test kits, the local Beijing News reported Tuesday.

In a sea change for a country where infection with the virus was once taboo and recovered patients faced discrimination, people are now taking to social media to show off their test results and give detailed descriptions of their experiences while sick.

"When my body temperature went past 37.2 degrees, I began to add some sugar and salt to my lemon water," Beijing-based Xiaohongshu social site user "Nina" wrote in an account intended as advice for those not yet infected.

Wang, another Beijing resident in his 50s, told AFP: "I think everyone has got used to it. They have moved on."

"I don't think people are that fragile."

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Citation: China says tracking COVID cases 'impossible' as infections soar (2022, December 14) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-12-china-tracking-covid-cases-impossible.html>

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