Greece extends lockdown past 2 months, expands vaccinations

January 8 2021, by Elena Becatoros and Derek Gatopoulos

A medical staff member of the National Health Organization (EODY) conducts a COVID-19 rapid test on a man at a drive-through testing site at Aspropyrgos suburb, west of Athens, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021. The western municipality of the Greek capital remains in a hard lockdown due to their heavy epidemiological burden as Greece will ramp up the speed of its coronavirus vaccination drive, the country's prime minister said Friday. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

Greece has extended a two-month lockdown by at least one week, through Jan. 18, and announced plans Friday to increase the number of people getting COVID-19 vaccines from 5,000 per day to 8,000 per day.

Restrictions the Greek government imposed in early November shut non-essential retail stores, entertainment venues, and restaurants and allow people to leave their homes for a limited number of specific reasons. Primary schools and kindergartens in Greece are scheduled to reopen on Monday. "We must, at all cost, take steps to counter the expected rise of infections that occurred over the Christmas holidays," Vana Papaevangelou, a scientific advisor to the government and a professor of infectious diseases at Athens University, told reporters.

Government officials have indicated a willingness to maintain the lockdown measures for a longer period. Greece launched its COVID-19 vaccination program in late December.

So far, nearly 35,000 people have received a first dose of a two-shot vaccine, according to government statistics. Greece has a population of around 11 million and has reported more than 143,000 confirmed coronavirus cases, including 5,195 deaths.

After maintaining a low infection rate earlier in the year, the country saw a huge spike in cases in the fall. More than 85% of Greece's pandemic deaths took place after Nov. 1.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, chairing a government meeting on COVID-19, said Friday that hospitals across the country, including the Greek islands, would receive vaccine supplies by Monday.

Priority is being given to health care workers at public and private hospitals, followed by care home residents and workers, people over age 80, and those with serious health conditions.

Separately, Greece's Civil Aviation Authority announced a new compulsory seven-day quarantine for any passenger flying into the country from abroad, including from European Union member countries, up to and including Jan. 21.

Passengers will also face spot rapid tests on arrival, while all are still required to provide proof of a negative coronavirus test a maximum of 72 hours before arrival, and fill in a passenger locator form.

Rapid tests on arrival are compulsory for passengers arriving from the United Kingdom, who will only be able to leave their quarantine if they test negative for COVID-19 at the end of the seven-day period, the announcement said.

The Civil Aviation Authority also announced an extension to the flight ban from Turkey and Spain's Catalonia region until Jan. 21, as well as the ban on arrivals for non-EU citizens except those from the UK, Singapore, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Rwanda, South Korea, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates.

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Citation: Greece extends lockdown past 2 months, expands vaccinations (2021, January 8) retrieved 23 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-01-greece-lockdown-months-vaccinations.html

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