

Too early to ease virus curbs in Europe, says WHO

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The World Health Organization's European branch on Thursday said it is too early to ease virus restrictions in Europe despite a drop in new cases in most countries.

Hans Kluge, the WHO's regional director for Europe, said 30 of the WHO European region's 53 countries had "seen a [significant decrease](#) in 14-day cumulative incidence."

"Yet, transmission rates across Europe are still very high, impacting [health systems](#) and straining services, making it too early to ease up," Kluge told an online press conference.

The regional director also noted that since only three percent of people in the region had already had a confirmed infection, areas that had been "hit badly once can be hit again."

Kluge described the current situation as a "pandemic paradox", noting that while the rollout of vaccines offered "remarkable hope... newly emerging variants of concern are presenting greater uncertainty and risk."

In the WHO's European Region, which includes Russia and several Central Asian countries, 35 states have started vaccinations, according to the WHO.

As for the new variant first discovered in the UK, it has been confirmed in 33 countries and the variant first identified in South Africa has been reported in 16.

According to AFP's own tally for Europe, which excludes some of the Central Asian countries in the WHO European region, new cases totalled 1,421,692 in the last seven days, down about 10 percent compared with the previous seven.

Days away from the one-year anniversary of the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Europe, Kluge said "breaking transmission chains is a clear priority."

However he also stressed that the impact on mental health was now so severe that poor [mental health](#) had become a "parallel pandemic".

Citing figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO), Kluge said half of people between 18 and 29, as well 20 percent of healthcare workers, were suffering from "anxiety and depression".

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