

# France launches controversial vaccine pass as fourth wave hits

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French cinemas, museums and sports venues began asking visitors Wednesday to furnish proof of COVID-19 vaccination or a negative test as the country, which is in the throes of a fourth wave of infections, rolled out a controversial vaccine passport system.

The so-called "health pass" is required for all events or places with more than 50 people before being extended to restaurants, cafes and shopping centres in August.

Prime Minister Jean Castex defended the policy, noting that nearly all new infections are in people who have not been immunised.

The number of new infections over 24 hours shot up to 21,000 on Wednesday, the highest level since early May.

"We're in the fourth wave," Castex told TF1 television, adding that the goal of the health pass is to avoid a fourth nationwide lockdown.

Health Minister Olivier Veran lashed out at [vaccine](#)

refuseniks, who have accused the government of flouting their freedom of choice.

"Freedom is not about dodging taxes, or driving the wrong way up the motorway, or smoking in a restaurant or refusing a vaccine that protects me as much as it protects others," he told parliament.

## 50-million target

The Louvre museum and Eiffel Tower were among the sites that began implementing the vaccine checks on Wednesday.

But whereas most tourists had their vaccine certificates at hand, having shown them on arrival in the country, some French people were wrong-footed by the new rules.

In the Paris suburb of Rosny-sous-Bois, 28-year-old Marie-Ange Rodrigues was surprised to be barred from a cinema screening after having received her second vaccine shot.

"It's rubbish!" she said of the requirement to have been fully vaccinated for at least a week.

Nearly 38 million people, representing 56 percent of the French population, have received at least one dose of a vaccine, according to data by the COVIDtracker.fr website.

Nearly 46 percent, have been fully vaccinated.

The government aims to have given at least one shot to 50 million people by the end of the summer.

## 'Fracture our country'

Tens of thousands of vaccine sceptics took to the streets in protest over the new vaccine rules last week, accusing President Emmanuel Macron of running a vaccine "dictatorship".

The restrictions have even faced criticism from some lawmakers in Macron's Republic on the Move (LREM) party, who see it as a threat to civil liberties.

"Protecting [public health](#) has been our priority since March 2020, but it has not threatened the cohesion of our country because the rules were the same for everyone," LREM lawmaker Pacome Rupin said on Tuesday.

"The health pass is going to fracture our country," he said.

Restaurant owners in particular are up in arms at the requirement to vet their customers' vaccination status before serving them.

In a concession Thursday, Castex said that they would not have to check customers' ID and that the government would not punish venues during the first week of the new rules.

After that, they face fines of up to 1,500 euros (\$1,700) for a first-time offence, and more for subsequent violations.

Children aged 12 to 17, who only became eligible for vaccination in mid-June, will not need the pass in August nor have to show one when heading back to school in September.

### **Masks return outdoors**

The changes introduced Wednesday were implemented by decree, but lawmakers also began debating a bill that will extend the rules next month to restaurants, as well as trains or planes for long-distance travel.

From September, vaccinations will also be mandatory for healthcare and retirement home workers, many of whom remain sceptical of the shots.

Left-wing parties particularly have slammed the health pass as an infringement of personal freedoms and said the government should be trying to convince rather than coerce people to get vaccinated.

Other measures to contain the surge in new cases include the reintroduction of rules requiring masks to be worn outdoors in hotspots such as the western coastal area around Bordeaux, a popular holiday destination.

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