Optimal lifting of COVID-19 restrictions would follow pace of vaccination, study suggests
2 September 2021

To address that question, Bauer and colleagues applied mathematical modeling to epidemiological and vaccination data from Germany, France, the U.K., and other European countries. Specifically, they quantified the pace at which restrictions could be lifted during vaccine rollout in order to mitigate the risk of rebound COVID-19 waves that overwhelm intensive care units.

After considering various plausible scenarios, the researchers concluded that further severe waves can only be avoided if restrictions are lifted no faster than the pace dictated by vaccination progress, and that there is basically no gain in freedom if one eases restrictions too quickly. The findings suggest that, even after 80 percent of the adult population has been vaccinated, novel, more infectious variants could trigger a new wave and overwhelm intensive care units if lifting all restrictions.

"In such an event, restrictions would quickly have to be reinstated, thus quickly vanishing the mirage of freedom," Priesemann says. "Furthermore, an early lift would have high morbidity and mortality costs. Meanwhile, relaxing restrictions at the pace of vaccination shows almost the same progress in ‘freedom’ while maintaining low incidence."

The researchers say their findings suggest that, despite public pressure, policymakers should not rush relaxation of restrictions, and a high vaccination rate—especially among high-risk populations—is necessary. Further research will be needed to design optimal scenarios from a global perspective.

More information: Bauer S, Contreras S, Dehning J, Linden M, Iftekhar E, Mohr SB, et al. (2021) Relaxing restrictions at the pace of vaccination increases freedom and guards against...
e1009288. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1009288

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