Tokyo eateries return to normal hours as virus cases drop

October 25 2021, by Mari Yamaguchi

People walk at a street in Tokyo, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021. People in Tokyo can eat and drink in bars and restaurants later in the evening starting Monday as officials ease social distancing rules with the country's daily coronavirus cases reaching their lowest levels in more than a year. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

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Crowds have been returning to bars and trains since Japan lifted its moderate state of emergency on Sept. 30. But officials in Tokyo had asked food and beverage businesses to maintain their early closures through Sunday as a precaution against a quick resurgence.

After seeing daily jumps of nearly 6,000 cases in mid-August, Tokyo is now reporting less than 50 new coronavirus infections a day. The 17 new cases reported on Monday was the lowest since June 2020.

"I'm overjoyed," Mitsuru Saga, owner of the Taiko Chaya Japanese restaurant in downtown Tokyo, said in an interview with Nippon Television. He said his restaurant will now operate until 11 p.m. for the first time in 11 months. Eateries had been asked to close by 9 p.m. and not serve alcohol.

But Saga said he's concerned that many people will still feel uneasy eating indoors.

"Many people now drink at home (due to COVID-19), and I'm worried whether customers will come back," he said.

Unlike other countries in Asia and Europe, Japan has so far weathered the pandemic without compulsory lockdowns. It has had a series of largely toothless states of emergency focused on eateries.

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People dine at a restaurant in Tokyo, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021. People in Tokyo can eat and drink in bars and restaurants later in the evening starting Monday as officials ease social distancing rules with the country's daily coronavirus cases reaching their lowest levels in more than a year. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

In this Oct. 4, 2021, file photo, people enjoy drinks at a bar following the end of the current coronavirus state of emergency restrictions, in Tokyo. People in Tokyo could eat and drink inside bars and restaurants for longer evening hours starting Monday, Oct. 25, 2021 as officials eased social distancing rules with the country's daily coronavirus cases reaching its lowest levels in more than a year. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File

In this May 25, 2021, file photo, people consume drinks at a bar after 8 p.m. government suggested closing time under a state of emergency, in Tokyo. People in Tokyo could eat and drink inside bars and restaurants for longer evening hours starting Monday, Oct. 25, 2021 as officials eased social distancing rules with the country's daily coronavirus cases reaching its lowest levels in more than a year. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File

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In this Sept. 22, 2021, file photo, people gather at bars that are open and serving alcohol on an ally filled with bars and restaurants despite Tokyo government has requested businesses not to serve alcohol under a state of emergency, in Tokyo. People in Tokyo could eat and drink inside bars and restaurants for longer evening hours starting Monday, Oct. 25, 2021 as officials eased social distancing rules with the country's daily coronavirus cases reaching its lowest levels in more than a year. Credit: AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato, File

Experts have been puzzled by Japan's sudden decline in virus cases. Some attribute it to a rapid vaccine rollout after a slow start, widespread mask wearing and subdued nightlife.

Japan has recorded about 1.7 million coronavirus cases and 18,200 deaths. About 70% of its population has been fully vaccinated.

Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike on Monday urged residents to remain vigilant and stick to basic precautionary measures as the winter sets in and the air turns drier -– an environment she said may help the virus spread.

She has asked eateries to limit each table to four people and ensure good ventilation and other anti-virus measures.

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