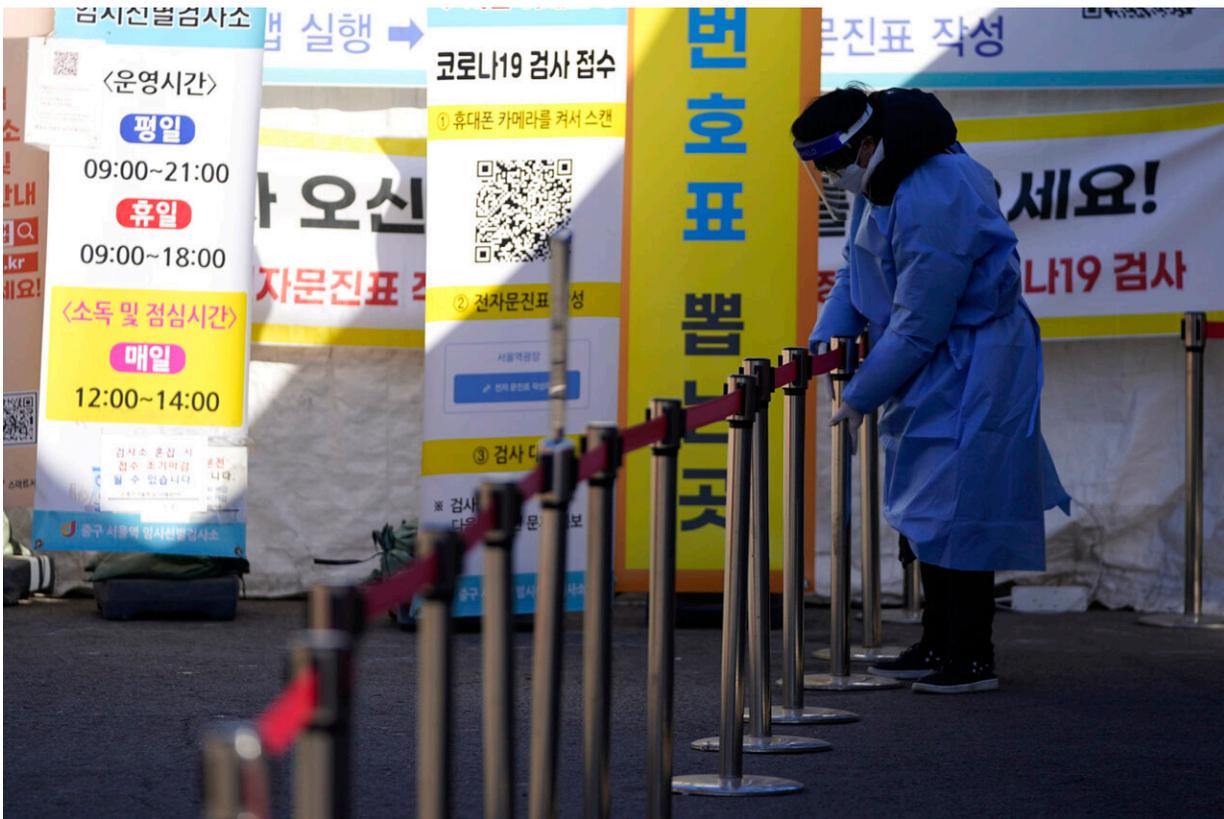


SKorea slightly eases distancing but warns of omicron surge

January 14 2022, by Kim Tong-Hyung



A health worker wearing protective gear prepares for visitors in the sub-zero temperatures at a temporary screening clinic for the coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Friday, Jan. 14, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lee Jin-man

South Korea will slightly ease its coronavirus gathering restrictions

starting next week but continue to maintain a 9 p.m. curfew on restaurants and entertainment venues, as it braces for a possible surge in infections driven by the contagious omicron variant.

Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol said Friday the four-person limit on private social gatherings between fully vaccinated people will be raised to six for at least three weeks starting Monday.

While officials have acknowledged frustration and fatigue with prolonged virus restrictions and the damage on small businesses, they say they couldn't afford to loosen social distancing rules further when the country may face a huge wave of cases in coming weeks as omicron continues to spread.

About 12% of South Korea's infections reported last week were of the omicron variant and officials say it could become the country's dominant in one or two weeks. Kwon raised concern that the spread could be accelerated by the Lunar New Year holiday break at the end of this month, when millions of people travel across the country to meet relatives.

Kwon pleaded with people stay home during the Jan. 29-Feb. 2 holidays and especially not visit aging relatives who aren't fully vaccinated. Visits to nursing homes will be banned during the period and officials will also limit the capacity on trains and ferries to discourage travel.



A medical worker wearing protective gear in a booth prepares to take samples in the sub-zero temperatures at a temporary screening clinic for the coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Friday, Jan. 14, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lee Jin-man



A health worker wearing protective gear helps a visitor to receive coronavirus testing in the sub-zero temperatures at a temporary screening clinic for the coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Friday, Jan. 14, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lee Jin-man

"Thanks to active cooperation by our people, our medical response has significantly improved ... but the increasing spread of omicron has us facing a new danger," Kwon said during a briefing. The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said the country may see its daily infections jump to levels around 30,000 by the end of February if it substantially loosens social distancing.

Restaurants, coffee shops, gyms and karaoke venues will continue to be required to close at 9 p.m. Adults will be asked to verify their

vaccination status through apps to use restaurants, movie theaters, museums, shopping malls and other indoor places. Most of these locations admit only fully vaccinated adults, but restaurants and coffee shops are allowed to accept one adult in each group who isn't fully vaccinated or vaccinated at all.

Experts say omicron, which has already become dominant in many countries, spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains. It also more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had previously been infected by prior versions of the virus. However, early studies show [omicron](#) is less likely to cause severe illness than the delta variant, and that vaccination and booster shots still offer strong protection from serious illness, hospitalization and death.

South Korea on Friday reported 4,542 new cases, including a record 409 linked to international arrivals. The daily count exceeded 7,000 several times last month during a delta-driven surge that caused a spike in hospitalizations and deaths, but transmissions have slowed in recent weeks as officials enforced tightened social distancing.

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