

COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

21st Dec 2021

Lockdown Exit

Omicron infections appear no less severe than Delta; COVID-19 lowers sperm count, motility

Researchers at Imperial College London compared 11,329 people with confirmed or likely Omicron infections with nearly 200,000 people infected with other variants. So far, according to a report issued ahead of peer review and updated on Monday, they see "no evidence of Omicron having lower severity than Delta, judged by either the proportion of people testing positive who report symptoms, or by the proportion of cases seeking hospital care after infection." For vaccines available in the UK, effectiveness against symptomatic Omicron infection ranged from 0% to 20% after two doses, and from 55% to 80% following a booster dose. The report also estimated that after taking individual risk factors into account, the odds of reinfection with Omicron are 5.4 times greater than for reinfection with Delta.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-infections-appear-no-less-severe-than-delta-covid-19-lowers-sperm-count-2021-12-20/>

Europe weighs Christmas curbs as Omicron sweeps continent

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Monday he would tighten coronavirus curbs to slow the spread of the Omicron variant if needed, after the Netherlands began a fourth lockdown and as other European nations consider Christmas restrictions. Speaking after UK media reported Britain might impose new curbs after Christmas, Johnson said the situation was "extremely difficult" and hospitalisations were rising steeply in London. "I have to say to the British public, and I say to everybody, we will not exclude the possibility of going further if we have to do things to protect the public," Johnson said after a cabinet meeting.

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/europe-weighs-christmas-curbs-omicron-sweeps-continent-2021-12-20/>

UK's Johnson defies pressure to impose COVID curbs over Christmas

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has defied pressure to tighten coronavirus rules over Christmas to curb surging Omicron cases, but pledged to keep the situation "under constant review". The embattled leader, who is reeling from weeks of crises over various scandals and is facing mounting disquiet within his ruling Conservative Party, said on Monday that "the possibility of taking further action" remained.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/20/uks-johnson-defies-pressure-to-impose-covid-curbs-over-christmas>

Moderna: Initial booster data shows good results on omicron

Moderna said Monday that a booster dose of its COVID-19 vaccine should offer protection against the rapidly spreading omicron variant. Moderna said lab tests showed the half-dose booster shot increased by 37 times the level of so-called neutralizing antibodies able to fight omicron. And a full-dose booster was even stronger, triggering an 83-fold jump in antibody levels, although with an increase in the usual side effects, the company said. While half-dose shots are being used for most Moderna boosters, a full-dose third shot has been recommended for people with weakened immune systems. Moderna announced the preliminary laboratory data in a press release and it hasn't yet undergone scientific review. But testing by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, announced last week by Dr. Anthony Fauci, found a similar jump.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/moderna-initial-booster-data-shows-good-results-on-omicron/ar-AARZuxp>

Israel to add US, Canada to travel ban over omicron variant

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office announced the decision following a Cabinet vote. The rare move to red-list the U.S. comes amid rising coronavirus infections in Israel and marks a change to pandemic practices between the two nations with close diplomatic relations. The U.S. will join a growing list of European countries and other destinations to which Israelis are barred from traveling, and from which returning travelers must remain in quarantine.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/israel-to-add-us-canada-to-travel-ban-over-omicron-variant/ar-AARYNgm>

Trump reveals he got COVID-19 booster shot; crowd boos him

Trump made the disclosure Sunday night during the final stop of "The History Tour," a live interview show he has been doing with former Fox News host Bill O'Reilly. "Both the president and I are vaxxed," O'Reilly said at the American Airlines Center, drawing some jeers from the audience, according to video shared online by O'Reilly's "No Spin News." "Did you get the booster?" he asked the former president. "Yes," Trump responded. "I got it, too," O'Reilly said, eliciting more hectoring. "Don't! Don't! Don't! Don't! Don't!" Trump told the crowd, waving off their reaction with his hand.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/trump-reveals-he-got-covid-19-booster-shot-crowd-boos-him/ar-AAS04PO>

UK medics warn of looming breaking point as omicron spreads

The following is a summary of some recent studies on COVID-19. They include research that warrants further study to corroborate the findings and that has yet to be certified by peer review. Omicron infections no less severe based on early UK data. Infections caused by the Omicron variant of the coronavirus do not appear to be less severe than infections from Delta, according to early data from the UK. Researchers at Imperial College London compared 11,329 people with confirmed or likely Omicron infections with nearly 200,000 people infected with other variants

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-europe-london-england-eddf1657a9462547826881562b71fb7>

Why changing the definition of 'fully vaccinated' could be difficult

Article reports that the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention might consider redefining what it means to be "fully vaccinated" against Covid-19 to include a third dose of vaccine -- but the question is when the definition could change. Such a change is "on the table and open for discussion," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said Friday. "That's certainly on the table. Right now, it is a bit of semantics," Fauci told CNBC's Andrew Ross Sorkin on "Squawk Box." Fauci was referring to the definition of "fully vaccinated" for the purpose of regulations or businesses that may require vaccination.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/20/health/fully-vaccinated-definition-cdc-explainer/index.html>

WHO sounds warning over fast-spreading Omicron

WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan added it would be "unwise" to conclude from early evidence that Omicron was a milder variant than previous ones. "... with the numbers going up, all health systems are going to be under strain," Soumya Swaminathan told Geneva-based journalists. The variant is successfully evading some immune responses, she said, meaning that the booster programmes being rolled out in many countries ought to be targeted towards people with weaker immune systems. "There is now consistent evidence that Omicron is spreading significantly faster than the Delta variant," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told the briefing.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/omicron-spreading-infecting-vaccinated-who-2021-12-20/>

Omicron sweeps across nation, now 73% of US COVID-19 cases

Omicron has raced ahead of other variants and is now the dominant version of the coronavirus in the U.S., accounting for 73% of new infections last week, federal health officials said Monday. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention numbers showed nearly a six-fold increase in omicron's share of infections in only one week. In much of the country, omicron's prevalence is even higher.

It's responsible for an estimated 90% of new infections in the New York area, the Southeast, the industrial Midwest and the Pacific Northwest.

<https://apnews.com/article/omicron-majority-us-cases-833001ef99862bd6ac17935f65c896cf>

After reprieve, NYC is rattled by a stunning virus spike

Just a couple of weeks ago, New York City seemed like a relative bright spot in the U.S. coronavirus struggle. Now it's a hot spot, confronting a dizzying spike in cases, scramble for testing, quandary over a major event and exhausting sense of déjà vu. An omicron-variant-fueled wave of cases is washing over the nation's most populous city, which served as a nightmarish test case for the country early in the pandemic. While health officials say there are important reasons why it's not spring 2020 all over again, some Broadway shows have abruptly canceled performances, an indoor face mask mandate is back and testing is hard to come by. "It's disappointing that we haven't developed a better system for this and that we weren't better prepared for there to be another wave," Jordan Thomas said Monday in her fourth hour of waiting for a test at a city-run health clinic near downtown Brooklyn.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-new-york-new-york-city-179cd759ed851789db86fa206986a736>

Exit Strategies

Kuwait to make COVID-19 vaccine booster compulsory

Kuwait will require anyone who has been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 for nine months to get a booster shot, the government communication centre tweeted on Monday. Kuwait will also require incoming travellers to quarantine at home for 10 days unless they receive a negative PCR test for the coronavirus within 72 hours of their arrival.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwait-make-covid-19-vaccine-booster-compulsory-2021-12-20/>

Global Covid vaccination failure will harm Britain, Gordon Brown warns

The failure to vaccinate the world against coronavirus will come back to haunt even fully vaccinated Britons in 2022, Gordon Brown has warned. The former prime minister said the emergence of Omicron was "not Africa's fault", and added that new variants would continue to wreak havoc because richer countries such as the UK had "stockpiled" hundreds of millions of vaccines. He rubbished suggestions wealthier nations faced a choice between offering boosters to their own citizens or sharing doses with people living in poorer countries. "Ours is not a fraught choice between boosters and vaccinating the world. We are manufacturing enough vaccines ... to immunise the whole world." Instead, Brown said it was an "inescapable and unacceptable fact" that of the billions of vaccines administered, only 0.6% ended up in low-income countries.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/dec/20/global-covid-vaccination-failure-will-harm-britain-gordon-brown-warns>

Death of child with Covid-19 prompts calls for Māori to be prioritised in NZ vaccine rollout

The first death of a child with Covid-19 in New Zealand has prompted calls for Māori children to be prioritised in the next stage of the vaccine rollout, as the country grapples with racial inequalities compounded by the pandemic. A Māori boy, under the age of 10 and who had tested positive for the virus, died last week, becoming the youngest New Zealander to die with Covid, the Ministry of Health confirmed. It is unclear whether Covid-19 was the cause of the boy's death, as New Zealand records all deaths of people considered active Covid cases in its official count. It is the country's 49th death of a Covid-positive person since the start of the pandemic. Māori make up an estimated 17.1% of the population but they have accounted for 32% of all Covid-19 related deaths.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/20/death-of-child-with-covid-19-prompts-calls-for-maori-to-be-prioritised-in-nz-vaccine-rollout>

Germany considers contact restrictions to soften blow from Omicron wave

German leaders are considering tougher contact restrictions and an accelerated booster campaign among other measures after experts warned that the Omicron coronavirus variant could bring critical infrastructure to breaking point. Chancellor Olaf Scholz said he supported the likely decision of a meeting of federal and state leaders planned for Tuesday to restrict private contacts for those who have been vaccinated, or have been infected and recovered. Scholz, speaking in Rome, said the meeting would also focus on the continued operation of critical institutions such as hospitals, police stations and electricity providers in case of high infection numbers, as well as handing out more boosters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-considers-contact-restrictions-soften-looming-covid-19-wave-2021-12-20/>

Thais resell private COVID-19 vaccination slots as free supplies build

Some Thais who had scrambled to book private hospital appointments to receive the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine have taken to social media to resell their slots after an influx of free government-supplied shots in recent weeks. A Facebook group with about 4,800 members, called Moderna First Lot Reservations, had users selling doses for around 1,000 baht (\$29.82) with some offering to buy shots for as low as 800 baht, down from an original price of 1,650 baht.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thais-resell-private-covid-19-vaccination-slots-free-supplies-build-2021-12-20/>

Biontech, Pfizer to provide EU with extra 200 mln COVID doses

BioNTech SE and Pfizer said that they would be providing the European Union with more than 200 million additional doses of the COVID-19 vaccine they produce. The two vaccine manufacturers said they agreed in May to supply 900 million doses to the European Commission in 2022 and 2023, with an option to request up to an additional 900 million. The doses announced on Monday are in addition to the 450 million already expected to be delivered in 2022, they said.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/biontech-pfizer-provide-eu-with-extra-200-mln-covid-doses-2021-12-20/>

Analysis: Rising cases, Omicron highlight holes in Biden's COVID strategy, experts say

Amid a new surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths ahead of the Christmas and New Year holidays, President Joe Biden is drawing criticism from health experts, who are calling for more urgency, testing, masking and global vaccine sharing. Biden, a Democrat, took office in January pledging to get the coronavirus under control. He presided over a massive vaccine rollout and passed a \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package, a sharp contrast with his predecessor, Republican Donald Trump, who downplayed the pandemic's severity, dismissed many preventive measures and undermined health experts.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/rising-cases-omicron-highlight-holes-bidens-covid-strategy-experts-say-2021-12-20/>

No lockdown before Christmas, Germany says

Germany's health minister Karl Lauterbach ruled out a Christmas lockdown on Sunday but warned a fifth COVID-19 wave could no longer be stopped and backed mandatory vaccination as the only way to stop the pandemic. "There will not be a lockdown before Christmas here. But we will get a fifth wave - we have crossed a critical number of Omicron infections," Lauterbach said, speaking on broadcaster ARD. "This wave can no longer be completely stopped." In another interview with BILD, Lauterbach added that he did not expect there to be a "hard lockdown" after the holidays either.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/no-lockdown-before-christmas-germany-says-2021-12-19/>

UK says COVID surge 'extremely difficult' as Omicron grips Europe

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Monday he would tighten coronavirus curbs to slow the

spread of the Omicron variant if needed, after the Netherlands began a fourth lockdown and as other European nations consider Christmas restrictions. Speaking after UK media reported Britain might impose new curbs after Christmas, Johnson said the situation was "extremely difficult" and hospitalisations were rising steeply in London.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/europe-weighs-christmas-curbs-omicron-sweeps-continent-2021-12-20/>

Sri Lanka to make COVID vaccine card must to enter public places

Sri Lanka will require the showing of a COVID-19 vaccination certificate compulsory for entry to public places starting from January 1, in a renewed attempt to prevent another spike in infections. Tourism Minister Prasanna Ranatunga made the announcement on Sunday in an abrupt switch from the gradual ending of restrictions put into place after the country was confronted with a third wave of COVID-19 infections in April caused by the Delta variant.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/20/sri-lanka-covid-vaccine-certificate-public-places>

Partisan Exits

UK PM's wine and cheese gathering was not a party, deputy PM says

Boris Johnson issued the latest of a string of denials on Monday that he and his staff had broken lockdown rules after a photograph appeared of the prime minister and more than a dozen others drinking wine in the garden of his Downing Street office. The photograph of the gathering, reportedly taken in May last year, follows reports of other apparent social events during times when his government had told Britons they should not mix with others.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/not-party-uk-says-picture-pm-johnson-lockdown-gathering-2021-12-20/>

Scientific Viewpoint

EU Commission authorises Novavax COVID-19 vaccine

The European Commission authorised on Monday the use of the Novavax COVID-19 vaccine in the European Union. "With five approved vaccines, the EU has a varied portfolio, based both on novel technologies, such as mRNA, and classic ones, like Novavax, which is protein-based," the head of the bloc's executive Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said on Twitter.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-commission-authorises-novavax-covid-19-vaccine-2021-12-20/>

Covid-19 news: Moderna booster stimulates antibodies against omicron

Moderna booster jab leads to 37-fold increase in levels of antibodies against the omicron variant. A booster dose of Moderna's coronavirus vaccine appears to increase neutralising antibodies against the coronavirus, the company announced on Monday. A 50mg dose of the booster – the dose authorised for use in the UK and US – was found to stimulate a 37-fold increase in antibodies against omicron. A 100mg dose of the booster saw an 83-fold increase in antibodies. The 37-fold increase "should provide some good level of protection as we go into the holiday season", Paul Burton, Moderna's chief medical officer, told the Washington Post. The findings are based on antibody levels measured in the blood of 20 people 29 days after receiving a third dose of the vaccine. Moderna announced the results in a press release – the study has not yet been published or peer reviewed.

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2237475-covid-19-news-moderna-booster-stimulates-antibodies-against-omicron/>

Kremlin convinced WHO will approve Sputnik V vaccine within months -Ifax

The Kremlin is convinced that the World Health Organization (WHO) will recognise Russia's flagship Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine within a few months, the Interfax news agency cited Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov as saying on Sunday. The Kremlin on Tuesday said Russia had still not handed over all the information needed for the vaccine to be approved by the WHO because of differences in regulatory standards. "I am deeply convinced that literally within a few months... the WHO will approve Sputnik and it will also then be possible to move forward on this path with the

Europeans," Interfax quoted Peskov as saying.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-convinced-who-will-approve-sputnik-v-vaccine-within-months-ifax-2021-12-19/>

French health regulator approves Pfizer vaccine for 5-11 year olds

France's Haute Autorite de Sante (HAS) health regulator approved the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for all children aged 5-11 on Monday. The vaccine, which will be administered in a paediatric formulation when it becomes widely available, showed high efficacy among children, said Lise Alter, one of the doctors charged with the risk evaluation of new drugs. "The HAS suggests that all parents who want it can have their children aged 5 to 11 years vaccinated," she added. Last week France started vaccinating 5-11 year olds with medical conditions that require special protection and ramped up logistics to roll out vaccination of all children in the age group once the HAS approves the move.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/french-health-regulator-approves-covid-vaccines-5-11-year-olds-2021-12-20/>

New Zealand links 26-year-old man's death to Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine

New Zealand authorities on Monday said they had linked a 26-year-old man's death to Pfizer Inc's COVID-19 vaccine after the person suffered myocarditis, a rare inflammation of the heart muscle, after taking his first dose. The death is New Zealand's second linked to a known but rare side effect from the vaccine after health authorities in August reported a woman had died after taking her doses. "With the current available information, the board has considered that the myocarditis was probably due to vaccination in this individual," a COVID-19 Vaccine Independent Safety Monitoring Board said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/new-zealand-links-26-year-old-mans-death-pfizer-covid-19-vaccine-2021-12-20/>

Bharat Biotech seeks trial for intranasal COVID-19 vaccine booster

Indian vaccine maker Bharat Biotech said on Monday it has submitted an application to the country's drug regulator to conduct a late-stage trial for a booster dose of its intranasal COVID-19 vaccine. Indian COVID-19 vaccine makers are lobbying the government to authorise boosters as supplies have far outstripped demand, but the health ministry said there is no immediate plan to approve boosters and the priority remains complete vaccination of eligible adults. read more "We have submitted phase 3 clinical trial application to DCGI (Drugs Controller General of India)," a Bharat Biotech spokesperson said in a statement, adding that an intranasal vaccine as a booster dose will be easier to administer in mass vaccination campaigns.

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/funds/bharat-biotech-seeks-trial-intranasal-covid-19-vaccine-booster-ani-2021-12-20/>

Sinopharm COVID-19 booster weaker against Omicron - study

A COVID-19 booster shot produced by China's Sinopharm had "significantly lower" neutralising activity against the Omicron variant, Chinese researchers said in a paper, although they added the vaccine's efficacy against Omicron remained unclear. The study - conducted by researchers from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and a Shanghai-based lab specializing in respiratory infectious diseases - compared the activity of Sinopharm's booster vaccine against an older coronavirus strain from Wuhan. The neutralising antibody activity of a Sinopharm BBIBP-CorV booster against Omicron showed a 20.1-fold reduction, compared with its activity against a Wuhan strain, according to the paper published on Saturday.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/sinopharm-covid-19-booster-weaker-against-omicron-study-2021-12-20/>

Moderna says booster dose of its COVID-19 vaccine appears protective vs. Omicron

Moderna Inc said that a booster dose of its COVID-19 vaccine appeared to be protective against the

fast-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus in laboratory testing and that the current version of the shot would continue to be its "first line of defense against Omicron." The company said its decision to focus on the current vaccine, mRNA-1273, was driven in part by how quickly the recently-discovered variant is spreading. Moderna said it still plans to develop a vaccine to protect against Omicron specifically and hopes to start clinical trials early next year.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/moderna-says-booster-dose-its-covid-19-vaccine-appes-protective-vs-omicron-2021-12-20/>

Novavax expected to start delivering COVID-19 shots to EU in first quarter 2022 -EU source

Novavax is expected to start delivering its COVID-19 vaccines to the European Union in the first quarter of 2022, an EU source said, as experts for the region's drug regulator met on Monday to decide whether to approve the shot. The EU Commission had no immediate comment and the U.S. biotech company was not immediately available for comment. The EU source declined to be identified because they were not authorised to speak to the media.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/novavax-is-expected-start-delivering-covid-19-shots-eu-q1-2022-eu-source-2021-12-20/>

Pharma After EMA recommendation, Novavax's COVID-19 vaccine nears rollout in Europe

In less than a week, Novavax has clinched a second major win in its bid to expand the reach of its COVID-19 vaccine. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) on Monday blessed Novavax's shot, Nuvaxovid, with a recommendation for conditional marketing authorization in the European Union. The news comes just a few days after the vaccine, also known as NVX-CoV2373, won emergency use listing from The World Health Organization (WHO), teeing up shipments to the agency's equitable vaccine access scheme COVAX. The shot will carry the Nuvaxovid name if it's authorized in Europe. Elsewhere, the vaccine has been authorized under the Covovax moniker.

<https://www.fiercepharma.com/pharma/novavax-s-covid-19-vaccine-recommended-for-conditional-authorization-europe>

For an antiviral researcher, Covid brings a flood of attention — and opportunity

At the heart of the effort to develop these therapies are scientists like Glenn. For them, Covid is a chance to prove that they can make a difference by developing new treatments not just for the current pandemic but also future threats. "We've always believed that what we work on is meaningful and can be very impactful, but now the world gets it," Glenn said. There remain questions about how long the boom times will last. Antiviral researchers have seen interest in their work flare — with the 2003 SARS outbreak, for instance, or the anthrax attacks after Sept. 11, 2001 — only to quickly dissipate. The same could happen with Covid, though many experts are hoping this time is different. "I seriously hope there is a realization that this needs to be a sustained effort," said Kara Carter, entrepreneur-in-residence at the biotechnology company Evotec and president of the International Society for Antiviral Research. "We've already had multiple viral epidemics and pandemics in our lifetimes, and this is not going to stop."

<https://www.statnews.com/2021/12/20/covid-antivirals-research-jeffrey-glenn/>

Facing intense criticism, Moderna pauses bitter dispute with the NIH over Covid-19 vaccine patents

Moderna has halted a rancorous patent dispute with the U.S. government over assigning credit for its Covid-19 vaccine, saying the ongoing quarrel "could interfere with further discussions aimed at an amicable resolution" with the National Institutes of Health. The move comes amid intensifying complaints that many vaccine makers are failing to make their intellectual property available so that still other companies can produce vaccines needed for a global eradication campaign. Moderna, which recently projected \$18 billion in vaccine sales this year, has been a particular focus of

criticism because U.S. taxpayers provided \$2.5 billion to help develop the shot.

<https://www.statnews.com/pharmalot/2021/12/19/covid19-omicron-vaccine-moderna-nih-patent/>

Coronavirus Resurgence

Omicron Prompts New Covid-19 Restrictions

New restrictions were set in place in Europe in an effort to stem the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus as a top U.S. health official warned that the variant is likely to strain American hospitals in the coming weeks. The rapidly spreading variant is already the dominant strain in the U.K., according to estimates derived from British health data, and is within days of becoming so in Denmark. Omicron has been detected in 89 countries, and Covid-19 cases of the variant are doubling every 1.5 to three days in places with community transmission, the World Health Organization said Saturday. The Netherlands on Sunday reimposed a lockdown in the face of Omicron, with all nonessential shops, bars and restaurants closed until mid-January.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-prompts-new-covid-19-restrictions-in-europe-11639921351>

US could be in store for a 'grim beginning' to the new year, experts warn, as dual variants of Covid-19 spread

With the Delta and Omicron coronavirus variants spreading across the nation as the new year approaches, health experts are urging Americans to get vaccinated or boosted to protect themselves and others before they face greater chances of infection. Airport travel before Christmas is up by nearly double from a year ago, according to Transportation Security Administration data, with more than 2 million people screened each day from December 16-18. And the indoor gatherings among friends and family could ultimately infect more who are at higher risk for Covid-19 complications. As the virus spreads, more cities are adding restrictions, including New York and Washington, DC. Mayor Muriel Bowser announced an indoor mask mandate for the District will be reinstated starting at 6 a.m. Tuesday, December 21 through January 31

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/20/health/us-coronavirus-monday/index.html>

Thailand says finds first reported local transmission of Omicron

A Thai woman has tested positive to the Omicron variant of the coronavirus in the Southeast Asian country's first reported case of local transmission, a health ministry official said on Monday. The woman contracted the virus from her husband, a Colombian who returned to Thailand from Nigeria in November, the official told a daily health ministry briefing.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-says-finds-first-reported-local-transmission-omicron-2021-12-20/>

Sydney shrugs off COVID-19 spike, resists calls to restore tough curbs

Australian authorities urged a "move away from fear" of the coronavirus on Monday, resisting calls to make masks mandatory indoors and limit the numbers of patrons at Sydney venues, even as new COVID-19 infections lingered near records. Despite the threat from the more transmissible Omicron variant, life returned to near normal in Sydney last week, with almost all tough curbs lifted ahead of Christmas, as vaccination rates rank among the world's highest. "There will always be new variants of this virus," said Dominic Perrottet, premier of the most populous state of New South Wales.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sydney-shrugs-off-covid-19-spike-resists-calls-restore-tough-curbs-2021-12-20/>

Royal Caribbean says 48 passengers test positive for Omicron variant on ship

Royal Caribbean Group said on Monday 48 people on its Symphony of the Seas cruise ship tested positive for COVID-19, fueling concerns that the new Omicron variant of the coronavirus could put a damper on a recovery in the cruise industry. The cruise operator said it had 6,091 guests and crew members on board the ship, which ended a week-long cruise in Miami on Saturday after setting sail on Dec. 11. The passengers who tested positive were asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic, Royal

Caribbean said in a statement, adding that six guests were disembarked earlier in the cruise and transported home.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/royal-caribbean-says-48-passengers-test-positive-covid-19-ship-2021-12-20/>

As Omicron threatens a global surge, some countries shorten COVID-19 booster timelines

A growing number of countries are reducing the wait time for COVID-19 vaccine boosters from six months to as few as three in a bid to ward off a new surge in infections from the Omicron variant. They are reacting to early evidence suggesting that Omicron is spreading faster than its predecessor, Delta, and is more likely to infect people who were vaccinated or had COVID in the past. Some scientists, however, say that giving boosters too soon could compromise the level of longer-term vaccine protection. While data remains limited, half a dozen laboratory studies have shown that an initial course of COVID-19 vaccines - typically given in two doses - is not enough to halt infection from the Omicron variant, but a booster shot may help.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-threatens-global-surge-some-countries-shorten-covid-19-booster-timelines-2021-12-20/>

British cabinet to discuss COVID moves as Omicron sweeps Europe

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Monday he would take more steps to slow the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant if needed, after the Netherlands began a fourth lockdown and as other European nations consider Christmas restrictions. Speaking after UK media reported Britain might impose new curbs after Christmas, Johnson said the situation was "extremely difficult" and hospitalisations were rising steeply in London. "I have to say to the British public, and I say to everybody, we will not exclude the possibility of going further if we have to do things to protect the public," Johnson said after a cabinet meeting.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/europe-weighs-christmas-curbs-omicron-sweeps-continent-2021-12-20/>

Fauci warns Omicron COVID variant 'raging through the world'

Top US pandemic adviser Anthony Fauci has warned of a bleak winter ahead as the Omicron coronavirus variant spurs a new wave of infections globally, sparking restrictions and concerns over hospital capacity. "One thing that's very clear ... is [Omicron's] extraordinary capability of spreading," Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told broadcaster NBC News on Sunday. "It is just ... raging through the world."

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/20/fauci-warns-of-bleak-winter-with-omicron-raging-through-world>

New Lockdown

Dutch streets deserted as snap Christmas COVID lockdown starts

Article reports that Dutch urban centres were largely deserted on Sunday as the country began a snap lockdown that, aimed at stemming an expected COVID-19 surge caused by the fast-spreading Omicron variant, left people's Christmas plans in disarray. Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced the shutdown on Saturday evening, ordering the closure of all but essential stores, as well as restaurants, hairdressers, gyms, museums and other public places from Sunday until at least Jan. 14. In Rotterdam, police used a water cannon to disperse a group of around 1,000 people who had gathered outside the city's main soccer stadium, ahead of a clash between local team Feyenoord and bitter rivals Ajax Amsterdam.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/netherlands-starts-painful-christmas-coronavirus-lockdown-2021-12-19/>