

COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

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Lockdown Exit

Many mutations of Omicron variant allow it to bond with human cells better than other Covid strains

Several mutations in the Omicron variant allow this coronavirus strain to bond with human cells more efficiently than past variants, a new study finds. Researchers at the University of British Columbia studied the variant with a highly powerful microscopy technique, examining its mutations. They found that Omicron has a much greater capacity to bind with human cell receptors than the original version of the coronavirus. The researchers also tested Omicron against antibodies, finding that it's more resistant to these immune system particles than other variants. This study was posted as a preprint and has not yet been peer-reviewed, but it aligns with other recent research on Omicron's capacity to spread very fast.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-10333635/Many-mutations-Omicron-variant-allow-bond-human-cells-better-strains.html>

Unvaccinated people who caught Delta have virtually no protection against Omicron infection, lab study suggests — but jabbed survivors are 'super immune'

People who are unjabbed but previously had the Delta Covid variant may have very little protection against Omicron infection, a lab study suggests. Austrian scientists tested the blood of those who had beat the older strain of the virus against the new super-variant to measure their antibody response. They found only one out of seven samples produced enough of the infection-fighting proteins to neutralise Omicron. It suggests that prior infection from Delta alone offers virtually no protection against catching Omicron — but the jury's still out on severe illness.

<https://www.msn.com/en-gb/health/medical/unjabbed-who-caught-delta-have-virtually-no-protection-against-omicron/ar-AAS1hvk>

Israel to offer fourth dose of COVID-19 vaccine to people over 60

Israel announced on Tuesday that it will offer a fourth dose of the COVID-19 vaccine to people older than 60, amid concern about the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. A Health Ministry expert panel recommended the fourth shot, a decision that was swiftly welcomed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett as "great news that will help us overcome the Omicron wave that is spreading around the world." Although the decision is pending formal approval by senior health officials, Bennett urged Israelis to get the dose as soon as possible, saying: "My message is - don't waste time, go get vaccinated." The decision follows the first known death in Israel of a patient with the Omicron variant.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-offer-fourth-dose-covid-19-vaccine-people-over-60-2021-12-21/>

Oxford, AstraZeneca launch work on Omicron-targeted vaccine

AstraZeneca Plc said on Tuesday it is working with Oxford University to produce a vaccine for the Omicron coronavirus variant, joining other vaccine-makers who are looking to develop the variant-specific vaccine. "Together with Oxford University, we have taken preliminary steps in producing an Omicron variant vaccine, in case it is needed and will be informed by emerging data," a spokesperson for the company said in a statement. Oxford did not immediately respond to a request for comment outside business hours.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/oxford-astrazeneca-launch-work-omicron-targeted-vac>

[cine-ft-2021-12-21/](#)

COVAX delivers 15,977,160 doses, more than its commitment

Until a few months ago, the proportion of the doses of Covid-19 vaccine supplied to Nepal by COVAX, the United Nations backed international vaccine sharing scheme, was much lower compared to the doses purchased by the government. But at present, the number of doses supplied by the facility is almost equal to the doses purchased by the government. According to data provided by the Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal has so far received 38,539,367 doses of Covid-19 vaccines—Vero Cell, Covishield, AstraZeneca type, AstraZeneca, Moderna, Janssen and Pfizer and BioNTech. The facility, which had committed to supply sufficient doses for 20 percent of the Nepali population which will be around 13 million, has already supplied over 15 million doses(15,977,160 doses) to Nepal. “Yes, we received more doses than what the facility had committed to provide us,” Dr Bibek Kumar Lal, director at the Family Welfare Division, told the Post.

<https://kathmandupost.com/health/2021/12/21/covax-delivers-15-977-160-doses-more-than-its-commitment>

Covid-19 Relief Drives Largest Federal-Grant Increase to States Since 2009

A surge in emergency Covid-19 funds contributed to the largest increase in federal grants to U.S. states since 2009, when Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Federal grants to states rose 37% in fiscal 2020 from the prior year, outpacing the average annual increase of 4% in the prior half-decade, according to a report by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Relative to 2008, the grants climbed 93%, accounting for inflation. The jump was mostly driven by pandemic-related grants, for needs such as coronavirus testing and housing assistance, but Medicaid and other health spending also contributed, and largely fueled the steady growth in funding to states for the past several years.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/covid-19-relief-drives-largest-federal-grant-increase-since-2009>

Spain Faces New Restrictions Despite High Vaccine Rates

Despite vaccination rates that make other governments envious, Spain and Portugal are facing the hard truth that, with the new omicron variant running rampant, these winter holidays won't be a time of unrestrained joy. Portugal on Tuesday announced a slew of new restrictions over Christmas and the New Year, making working from home mandatory and shutting discotheques and bars beginning Saturday night. Also, a negative test result must be shown to enter Portuguese cinemas, theaters, sports events, weddings and baptisms until at least Jan. 9.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/spain-faces-new-restrictions-despite-high-vaccine-rates>

Thailand reinstates mandatory COVID-19 quarantine over Omicron concerns

Thailand will reinstate its mandatory COVID-19 quarantine for foreign visitors and scrap a quarantine waiver from Tuesday due to concerns over the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. The decision to halt Thailand's "Test and Go" waiver means visitors will have to undergo hotel quarantine, which ranges between 7 to 10 days. Meanwhile, a so-called "sandbox" programme, which requires visitors to remain in a specific location but allows them free movement outside of their accommodation, will also be suspended in all places except for the tourist resort island of Phuket.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-reinstates-mandatory-covid-19-quarantine-scraps-waiver-programme-2021-12-21/>

'Significant surge' in European cases expected as Omicron spreads - WHO

The World Health Organization's European head on Tuesday warned countries to brace for a "significant surge" in COVID-19 cases as Omicron spreads, and advised the widespread use of boosters for protection. Since it emerged in late November, Omicron has been detected in at least 38 of the 53 countries in the WHO's European region and is already dominant in several of them

including Denmark, Portugal and the United Kingdom, Hans Kluge told a news conference in Vienna.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/significant-surge-european-cases-expected-omicron-spreads-who-2021-12-21/>

EU sets binding 9-month validity of vaccinations for COVID-19 travel pass

The European Commission on Tuesday adopted rules that will make the European Union COVID-19 certificate valid for travel nine months after the completion of the primary vaccination schedule. The proposal comes as several EU states introduce additional requirements on travellers in a bid to reduce the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant. EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders told Reuters the EU Commission was against additional requirements, and was assessing the measures.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-sets-binding-9-month-validity-vaccinations-covid-19-travel-pass-2021-12-21/>

Europe considers new curbs as Omicron sweeps world

Countries across Europe considered new curbs on movement on Tuesday as U.S. President Joe Biden called on military medics to support hospitals and fight the Omicron variant that has swept the world days before the second Christmas of the pandemic. Omicron infections are multiplying across Europe, the United States and Asia, including in Japan, where a single cluster of COVID-19 cases at a military base has grown to at least 180. "We can see another storm coming," said Hans Kluge, the World Health Organization's European head, warning European countries to brace for a "significant surge" in COVID-19.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/omicrons-global-spread-prompts-renewed-lockdowns-delayed-reopenings-2021-12-21/>

China must share more data on virus origins - WHO chief

China must be more forthcoming with data and information related to the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Monday. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that there had been "many failures" during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of rules or obligations under the WHO's current 2005 International Health Regulations.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china-must-share-more-data-virus-origins-who-chief-2021-12-20/>

Exit Strategies

German committee recommends booster after three months as Omicron spreads

Germany's STIKO vaccine authority on Tuesday shortened the recommended period between a second coronavirus shot and a booster to three months from six, reflecting the increasing presence of the highly infectious Omicron variant. The authority said anyone over age 18 should have a booster using an mRNA vaccine three months after completing a two-shot course of COVID-19 vaccines. STIKO previously recommended anyone fully vaccinated with an mRNA vaccine should wait six months after their last shot. For the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, that period remains four weeks.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/german-vaccine-committee-recommends-booster-after-three-months-2021-12-21/>

Philippines cuts COVID-19 booster shot interval to three months

The Philippines' health ministry on Tuesday halved the wait time for a COVID-19 vaccine booster to three months to help prevent the spread of the more infectious Omicron variant. A growing list of countries, including South Korea, the United Kingdom, Thailand and Germany, are shortening the interval for boosters to try to stave off a new surge in infections. Adults can receive a booster dose at least three months after the second shot of a two-dose vaccine, cutting the six-month gap. Recipients of a single-dose vaccine can get a booster shot after two months, the health ministry said.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-cuts-covid-19-booster-shot-interval-three-months-2021-12-21/>

Scotland cancels public New Year events as new COVID curbs announced

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon on Tuesday said public New Year's Eve celebrations in Scotland would be cancelled as she set out plans for post-Christmas restrictions on large scale events to try to slow the spread of the Omicron variant. Britain has reported record levels of COVID-19 cases over the past week, with officials and ministers warning that hospitalisations are also rising. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, under pressure from many in his own party not to introduce further curbs, held off announcing new restrictions for England following a cabinet meeting on Monday but said they may yet be needed

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/scotland-sets-out-covid-restrictions-large-events-post-christmas-2021-12-21/>

Israel Bets Travel Restrictions Will Buy It Time to Fight Omicron

As the Omicron variant spreads quickly across the world, Israel has leaned more heavily than other countries on shutting down its borders to international travel, wagering it would slow down a coming wave of infections and buy time to prepare. So far, Israel has closed its borders to foreigners and has also banned its residents from traveling to dozens of countries, including the U.S. and Canada, the U.K., much of Europe and most of Africa. "Our sole aim is to delay this massive local transmission," Prof. Ran Balicer, a senior adviser to the government on the pandemic, said Monday while explaining the travel restrictions to journalists in a briefing organized by the Europe Israel Press Association.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-bets-travel-restrictions-will-buy-it-time-to-fight-omicron-11640100113>

Australia rules out lockdowns despite Omicron surge

Australia must move past "the heavy hand of government" and authorities must stop shutting down people's lives with COVID-19 lockdowns, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Tuesday, as daily infections in the country shot up to a new pandemic high. COVID-19 cases have been breaking records over the last several days, the surge fuelled by the more transmissible Omicron variant, but Morrison insisted that limiting the spread of the virus comes down to personal responsibility. "We have got to get past the heavy hand of government and we have got to treat Australians like adults," Morrison told reporters, urging authorities to shift from "a culture of mandates" when it comes to masks and social distancing rules.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-rules-out-lockdowns-despite-omicron-surge-2021-12-21/>

NFL could become trend-setter for COVID-19 testing policies

The NFL's decision to reduce COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic, vaccinated players could signal a trend for pro sports leagues and provide an example for society to follow heading into 2022. Despite a rising number of positive cases that forced three games to be rescheduled over the weekend, the NFL, in cooperation with the players' union, agreed on Saturday to scale back testing for vaccinated players. The move aligns with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC recommends "diagnostic testing" only for symptomatic or close-contact vaccinated people, and "screening tests" only for unvaccinated people. The NFL previously required vaccinated players to get tested weekly before amending the protocols. The NFLPA had advocated for daily testing for vaccinated players but eventually agreed to "target" testing.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-nfl-sports-health-centers-for-disease-control-and-prevention-eeb613166aa977d119a28349d5aa70f6>

Biden to pledge 500M free COVID-19 tests to counter omicron

Fighting the omicron variant surging through the country, President Joe Biden announced the government will provide 500 million free rapid home-testing kits, increase support for hospitals under strain and redouble vaccination and boosting efforts. At the White House on Tuesday, Biden detailed major changes to his COVID-19 winter plan, his hand forced by the fast-spreading variant, whose properties are not yet fully understood by scientists. Yet his message was clear that the winter holidays could be close to normal for the vaccinated while potentially dangerous for the

unvaccinated. His pleas are not political, he emphasized. He noted that former President Donald Trump has gotten his booster shot, and he said it's Americans' "patriotic duty" to get vaccinated.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-joe-biden-health-jen-psaki-08ee41d8e7c0af1ad8b4dfb7b434ea61>

France Covid Vaccine Pass to Come Into Force in Early January

France will require that people are fully vaccinated to enter bars, restaurants and cultural venues starting in early January to help slow the spread of the omicron strain of Covid-19. The vaccine pass will come into force from the first two weeks of the new year, government spokesman Gabriel Attal said in a statement to reporters on Tuesday. Under the new system, a negative test will no longer be an alternative to vaccination. "We've got no time to lose in the face of the omicron variant," Attal said. "The forecasts are worrying, it's true. We're entering an area of turbulence, it's certain. But we have the weapons to fight."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/france-pushing-to-bring-in-vaccine-pass-in-first-half-of-january>

Edinburgh's New Year Celebrations Scrapped After Omicron Surge

Edinburgh's famous Hogmanay street celebrations at New Year were canceled again after a surge in cases of the omicron variant in Scotland, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said. The government will also limit the number of fans at soccer matches to 500 from Dec. 26 for three weeks. More money will also be made available to support businesses after an increase in funding from the U.K. Treasury, albeit falling short of what Scotland would like to spend, she said. The omicron variant of Covid-19 is currently ripping through the country and is more transmissible than previous strains. The priority is to deliver all booster vaccinations for adults and ensure that schools can reopen as normal after the winter break, Sturgeon said.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/edinburgh-s-new-year-celebrations-scrapped-after-omicron-surge>

Businesses fret as South Korea reimposes COVID-19 curfews

As clocks struck 9 p.m. this week, customers packed up and left restaurants and other eateries across South Korea as a reimposed curfew designed to help stem a surge in coronavirus infections sparks fears of economic disaster for some businesses. Last week authorities announced a series of social distancing measures lasting until at least Jan. 2. They include limiting gatherings to no more than four people and forcing restaurants, cafes and bars to close by 9 p.m. (1200 GMT). The measures came just six weeks after highly-vaccinated South Korea eased many restrictions to try to "live with COVID-19." Since then daily cases and serious infections have hit record highs, adding to strains on the country's medical system.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/businesses-fret-south-korea-reimposes-covid-19-curfews-2021-12-21/>

New Zealand delays border re-opening over Omicron concerns

New Zealand on Tuesday postponed its phased border re-opening plans until the end of February over concerns of the rapid global spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. The South Pacific nation had just started easing some of the world's toughest pandemic measures and its international border restrictions were to progressively loosen from January, with all foreign tourists allowed into the country from April. Non-quarantine travel, which was to have opened for New Zealanders in Australia from Jan. 16, would be pushed back until the end of February, COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said at a press conference in Wellington.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/new-zealand-delays-re-opening-plans-over-omicron-concerns-2021-12-21/>

Biden to deliver free tests to battle surging Omicron

U.S. President Joe Biden announced on Tuesday the opening of more federal vaccination and testing sites to tackle a surge in COVID-19 cases sparked by the Omicron variant, and said some 500 million at-home rapid tests will be available to Americans for free starting in January. Biden offered both a warning to the unvaccinated, who he said have "good reason to be concerned," and reassurance

that those who are inoculated can gather for the holidays despite the new variant sweeping the country. "No this is not March of 2020," Biden told reporters at the White House. "Two hundred million people are fully vaccinated, we're prepared, we know more."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/omicron-surges-biden-expand-testing-warn-unvaccinated-2021-12-21/>

U.S. mulls reducing COVID quarantine time amid Omicron surge

U.S. health authorities are considering reducing the 10-day recommended quarantine period for Americans who test positive for COVID-19 as the Omicron variant tears across the country, White House medical adviser Anthony Fauci said on Tuesday. A spike in COVID-19 cases is alarming public health officials who fear an explosion of infections following social mingling over the Christmas and New Year holidays. Omicron now accounts for 73% of U.S. coronavirus infections, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Monday. Breakthrough infections are rising among the fully vaccinated population, including those who have had a third, booster shot. However, Omicron appears to be causing milder symptoms in those people, some of whom have no symptoms at all.

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/us-mulls-reducing-covid-quarantine-time-amid-omicron-surge-2021-12-21/>

Europe weighs Omicron curbs as Biden turns to military medics

Countries across Europe considered new curbs on movement on Tuesday while U.S. President Joe Biden appealed to all Americans to get vaccinated to fight the Omicron variant sweeping the world days before the second Christmas of the pandemic. Omicron infections are multiplying across Europe, the United States and Asia, including in Japan, where a single cluster of COVID-19 cases at a military base has grown to at least 180. "If you're not fully vaccinated, you have good reason to be concerned," Biden said at the White House, where he unveiled plans to buy 500 million rapid COVID-19 tests to be distributed for free to Americans who request them starting in January.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/omicrons-global-spread-prompts-renewed-lockdowns-delayed-reopenings-2021-12-21/>

Partisan Exits

America's Mixed Response to the Omicron Variant Comes Down to Geography

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country's top infectious-disease expert, said Sunday on ABC News that he doesn't anticipate the U.S. moving toward broad shutdowns, even as some European countries have imposed new restrictions. He also said vaccinated Americans who have received booster shots can feel comfortable traveling this month to see family. The U.S. is now averaging more than 125,000 new Covid-19 cases a day, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The seven-day average for Covid-19 hospital admissions fell 4.8% in the week ended Dec. 18 to 7,501 a day, but hospitalizations are up 49% from a recent low in early November, CDC data show. Deaths increased to a seven-day average of 1,182 a day as of Dec. 17, up 3.6% versus the previous week.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-mixed-response-to-the-omicron-variant-comes-down-to-geography-11640040779>

Indian man fined for wanting Modi's face cut from vaccine drive

An Indian man who went to court to complain about Prime Minister Narendra Modi promoting himself as the face of the nation's COVID-19 vaccination drive has walked away with a fine for "wasting" the judge's time. India's Hindu nationalist prime minister has been the focus of an enormous advertising blitz touting his government's triumphs in fighting the pandemic despite nearly 500,000 Indians dying of COVID-19, according to official data. Health experts fear the actual toll could be much higher.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/21/india-kerala-man-fined-modi-face-covid-vaccine-drive-poster>

UK offers 1 billion pounds to businesses hurt by omicron

Britain announced 1 billion pounds (\$1.3 billion) in grants and other aid to help the hospitality industry survive the onslaught of the omicron variant of COVID-19, bowing to days of pressure from pubs, restaurants and other businesses that complain public health warnings have torpedoed the vital Christmas season. Businesses in the hospitality and leisure sectors in England will be eligible for one-time grants of up to 6,000 pounds (\$7,954) each. An additional 100 million pounds (\$133 million) will be given to local governments to support businesses in their areas hit by the sudden spike in COVID-19 infections driven by the highly transmissible new variant. While industry groups welcomed the funding, many said it was too narrowly focused and more assistance would be needed if the surge in infections continues or the government imposes more restrictions.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-public-health-518704a0a2cc3aa95b32284b52dac6bf>

'We Haven't Invested in Public Health': Trump CDC Leader Speaks

Robert Redfield spoke to Bloomberg News for more than an hour last month, discussing his time running the CDC and how he thinks it should change. He was often criticized as too deferential to then-president Donald Trump as the U.S. struggled with consistent messaging during the first year of the pandemic. Now retired from government, he says running the agency was a privilege but that it needs substantial changes to prepare for the future — including deploying more people around the U.S. and the globe, modernizing its data operations and abandoning a slow-moving culture.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/-we-haven-t-invested-in-public-health-trump-cdc-leader-speaks>

Romanian crowd tries to storm parliament in protest at COVID-19 pass

Romanian protesters tried to force their way into parliament on Tuesday, blocking traffic and vandalising some cars in the capital Bucharest in an attempt to prevent lawmakers from making a COVID-19 health pass mandatory for workers. Riot police were caught off guard when hundreds of protesters poured in through a yard gate, spray painting cars and forcing security staff to block the building's entryways. The protesters later left. Police did not use force. While the ruling coalition of centrists and leftists is currently negotiating the terms of a health pass mandate, no such bill is on parliament's legislative agenda at the moment.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-crowd-tries-storm-parliament-protest-covid-19-pass-2021-12-21/>

The Guardian view on Boris Johnson's Covid plan: decided by Tory rebels

Mr Johnson's behaviour, and the suggestion that he is beholden to no one, has provoked a crisis of government. Caught between the spread of a highly infectious Omicron variant and a Tory revolt, the prime minister dithered and delayed. His own scientific advisers say that there are likely to be between 1,000 and 2,000 Covid hospital admissions a day in England by the end of the year. The case for more Covid restrictions, they say, is overwhelming. Yet cabinet ministers dismiss the modelling – signalling to backbench rebels that they are with them. Others are perhaps afraid of being blamed for cancelling Christmas when people begin travelling around the country. Mr Johnson calculated that he was too weak in office to risk a Commons showdown with his party over new restrictions. Policy is being decided by Tory MPs, many of whom have no plan beyond “let Omicron rip”.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/20/the-guardian-view-on-boris-johnsons-covid-plan-decided-by-tory-rebels>

Continued Lockdown

Sweden New Covid Restrictions: Vaccine Pass Forms Part of Tighter Curbs

Sweden will introduce a range of new measures to curb Covid-19 transmission as hospitalizations increase and the Nordic country prepares for a surge of infections caused by the omicron variant. “We have a new virus variant and the situation has changed,” Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said at a press conference Tuesday. “We need to do what is needed and it will get tougher for a

while." From Thursday, new rules state that large events will have to require proof of vaccination for entry, restaurants may only serve seated patrons and all events with more than 20 participants will need to take some form of precaution to lower the risk of virus transmission.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/sweden-introduces-new-covid-measures-as-transmission-accelerates>

Iceland Tightens Covid Curbs Amid Surge in Cases

Iceland is taking stronger measures to quell a surge in Covid-19 cases after daily infections reached a record. The North Atlantic island's government cut the number of people allowed at gatherings to 20 from the current 50, Health Minister Wilum Thor Thorsson said on Tuesday. When rapid tests are in use, 200 people will be allowed to gather, down from the current 500. The new rules take effect at midnight. "We are very worried," Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir told local media after a government meeting. "Uncertainty over how effective vaccinations are against the new variant calls for the government to react."

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/iceland-tightens-covid-curbs-amid-surge-in-cases?utm_source=google&utm_medium=bd&cmpid=google

Scientific Viewpoint

Covid US: Fauci says Omicron spreads at 'unprecedented' speed and cases will DOUBLE every two days

Dr Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said Tuesday that the Omicron COVID-19 variant is spreading at an 'unprecedented' speed. The CDC revealed on Monday night that the new variant accounts for 73% of new cases in the U.S., and is now the nation's dominant strain. It only accounted for 12% of cases last week. Fauci says that while cases of the variant are usually more mild, the speed of which it spreads could still cause massive issues for the U.S. healthcare system. The first U.S. based Omicron COVID-19 death was recorded on Monday in an unvaccinated Texas man between ages 50 and 60. More than 250,000 COVID-19 cases were recorded on Monday, the first time since early September the mark was reached. In New York and New Jersey, the Midwest, the Southeast, the Gulf Coast, and the Northwest, the Omicron variant now account for more than 90 percent of new cases

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-10332665/Dr-Fauci-says-Omicron-spreads-truly-unprecedented-speed-cases-DOUBLE-two-days.html>

EU drug regulator: COVID-19 boosters help restore some protection against Omicron

The European Union's drug regulator said early data shows a booster dose of a COVID-19 vaccine helps restore some protection against the new Omicron variant, although there is no evidence yet that tweaks to existing shots will be necessary. "Data is showing that indeed there is a drop in the ability of the (COVID-19) vaccine to exert good neutralisation for Omicron," said Marco Cavaleri, head of biological health threats and vaccines strategy at the European Medicines Agency (EMA). "A booster dose is indeed able to restore quite (a) high level of protection from symptomatic disease," he said later in the same briefing.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-drug-regulator-still-unclear-if-covid-19-shots-need-tweaking-omicron-2021-12-21/>

Belgian researchers warn against holiday reliance on COVID antigen tests

Belgian researchers on Tuesday issued a pre-holiday warning against over-reliance on COVID-19 rapid antigen tests, saying they believed the breath of people infected with the disease had high levels of virus in the first two days after an infection -- a period when many antigen tests were negative. The organizations involved said they were communicating their findings in advance of a peer-reviewed publication in the interests of public health, as many families may be planning to use antigen tests as a way of screening for illness before family gatherings. "A negative rapid antigen

test just before a meeting offers no guarantee to protect others, in particular when the person tested has recently been exposed to the virus," said Emmanuel Andre, a microbiologist at KU Leuven, which conducted the research together with UZ Leuven, a university hospital, and IMEC, a microelectronics think-tank.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/belgian-researchers-warn-against-holiday-reliance-covid-antigen-tests-2021-12-21/>

Long Covid Patients Report Vibrations, Tremors: 'My Body Is Moving Inside, It's Jolting'

Ms. Morrison, a 50-year-old transplant coordinator at a New Orleans hospital, says the sensations are among the symptoms she has experienced since testing positive for Covid-19 in March 2020. Long Covid patients—estimated to be 10% to 30% of people who have had Covid-19—experience a range of symptoms including fatigue, cognitive problems, shortness of breath and sensory issues, such as numbness and tingling. Internal vibrations and external tremors are less common and have received less attention. Yet a study this summer from the Patient-Led Research Collaborative, a group of long Covid patients that conduct research, found that roughly 40% of patients reported experiencing tremors and 30% vibrating sensations.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/long-covid-patients-report-vibrations-tremors-my-body-is-moving-inside-its-jolting-11640098486>

Omicron is more transmissible, but is it really milder?

The emergence of the Omicron variant has changed the course of the pandemic once again. Just as many countries were beginning to enjoy easing of restrictions and many families were planning for Christmas, the new variant arrived, forcing governments to scramble over measures to help curb its spread. Although it is widely accepted the Omicron variant did not originate in South Africa, because it had the technology and sense of responsibility to report the new variant, it has unfairly had the most severe travel restrictions imposed upon it by other countries. South African doctors and politicians have been critical of the global response, feeling it too harsh and disproportionate to the threat posed by the Omicron variant.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/12/20/omicron-is-more-transmissible-but-is-it-really-milder>

Covid-19 Pills Expected to Win FDA Authorization This Week

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is poised to authorize a pair of pills from Pfizer Inc. and Merck & Co. to treat Covid-19 as soon as this week, according to people familiar with the matter -- a milestone in the fight against the pandemic that will soon expand therapies for the ill. An announcement may come as early as Wednesday, according to three of the people. They asked not to be identified ahead of the authorization and cautioned that the plan could change. Pfizer's pill, Paxlovid, and Merck's molnupiravir are intended for higher-risk people who test positive for the coronavirus. The treatments, in which patients take a series of pills at home over several days, could ease the burden on stretched hospitals with infections poised to soar through the winter in the U.S.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/fda-expected-to-authorize-pfizer-merck-covid-pills-this-week>

Pardes to go public, says COVID-19 antiviral pill does not need booster

Pardes Biosciences on Tuesday said early human testing of its experimental COVID-19 antiviral pill supports its potential as a standalone treatment and announced plans to go public by merging with a special purpose acquisition company. If the drug, PBI-0451, proves effective in later-stage testing, it could have an advantage over similar medicines that need to be taken with a second, booster medication, such as Pfizer Inc's (PFE.N) two-drug antiviral regimen, Paxlovid, now under review by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Pardes said it expects to complete its current Phase I study in healthy volunteers early next year. It aims to begin by mid-year a larger trial that could be used to seek regulatory approval for the COVID-19 antiviral pill.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/exclusive-pardes-go-public-says-covid-19-antiviral-pill->

[does-not-need-booster-2021-12-21/](#)

German COVID experts push for immediate contact limits

Germany will introduce new measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 before New Year's Eve, including limiting private gatherings for vaccinated people to a maximum of 10 people, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on Tuesday. Stopping well short of a nationwide lockdown, Scholz also agreed with the premiers of Germany's 16 states to close clubs and discos and to only allow big events, including soccer matches, without spectators.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germanys-rki-recommends-maximum-contact-restrictions-starting-once-2021-12-21/>

Moderna could be ready to develop Omicron booster in weeks - CEO

COVID-19 vaccine maker Moderna (MRNA.O) does not expect any problems in developing a booster shot to protect against the Omicron variant of the coronavirus and could begin work in a few weeks, Chief Executive Stephane Bancel said in an interview. Moderna hopes to start clinical trials early next year on a vaccine to protect against the fast-spreading Omicron variant but for now is focussing on a booster dose of its current mRNA-1273 vaccine. "It only needs minor adjustments for Omicron. I don't expect any problems," Bancel said in an interview with the Swiss newspaper TagesAnzeiger published on Tuesday.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/moderna-could-be-ready-develop-omicron-booster-weeks-ceo-2021-12-21/>

Omicron cases could hit 200,000 a day next year without tougher restrictions, Doherty modelling warns

Surging Omicron infections will overwhelm the health system unless some restrictions return, according to modelling prepared for national cabinet that also recommends bringing coronavirus vaccine boosters forward. The Doherty Institute modelling predicts that without low-to-medium restrictions such as density and visitor limits, waning vaccine protection against the Omicron variant puts Australia on track to hit about 200,000 cases a day by late January or early February.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/omicron-cases-could-hit-200-000-a-day-next-year-without-tougher-restrictions-doherty-modelling-warns-20211221-p59ja0.html>

Coronavirus Resurgence

Chinese city delays clearing travellers, cargos at port of entry after one COVID-19 infection

A Chinese city next to Vietnam border postponed from Tuesday the clearing of travellers and cargos to pass through its port of entry on COVID-19 concerns, state media reported. Dongxing city in the autonomous Chinese region of Guangxi advised that exports and imports of urgent cargos should be planned to avoid loss from the waiting, state broadcaster CCTV said in a report. The measure is part of the city's effort to cope with "current COVID-19 situation", said CCTV, without providing further details on the virus risk. It came after Dongxing detected one COVID-19 infection during routine testing.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-city-delays-clearing-travellers-cargos-port-entry-after-one-covid-19-2021-12-21/>

Now-dominant Omicron variant drives surge in COVID cases across U.S.

COVID-19 cases surged in New York City and across the United States over the weekend, dashing hopes for a more normal holiday season, resurrecting restrictions and stretching the country's testing infrastructure ahead of holiday travel and gatherings. The fast-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus has become dominant in the United States with lightning speed, and claimed the life on Monday of an unvaccinated man in Texas, officials said. The spike in COVID-19 cases is alarming

public health officials, who fear an explosion of infections after the Christmas and New Year's holidays.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/omicron-fueled-covid-wave-crashes-into-new-york-days-before-christmas-2021-12-20/>

Sweden hardens COVID curbs amid worries over Omicron

Sweden will urge all employees to work from home if possible and impose tighter rules for social distancing, the government said on Tuesday, as it ratchets up restrictions to fight a surge in new infections and the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus. The number of new virus cases in Sweden, which sparked international attention last year for its rejection of hard lockdowns, have shot up in recent weeks after a calm autumn when most restrictions were phased out. Hospitalizations and intensive care cases are still among the lowest per capita in Europe, but have also begun rising.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-tightens-covid-restrictions-cases-mount-2021-12-21/>

WHO urges people to consider canceling holiday plans amid omicron surge

World Health Organization Director-General is urging people across the globe to consider cancelling their holiday gatherings. "There can be no doubt that increased social mixing over the holiday period in many countries will lead to increased cases, overwhelmed health systems and more deaths," Tedros said. White House medical adviser Anthony Fauci on Tuesday reiterated his claim that vaccinated Americans can feel comfortable communing with other vaccinated individuals.

<https://thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/prevention-cures/586733-who-urges-people-to-consider-canceling-holiday>

New Lockdown

Germany to Impose Tighter Curbs as Nation Braces for Omicron

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pushed through tighter social-distancing restrictions to stave off the threat of a "massive" surge of the omicron Covid-19 variant just as families gather for the Christmas holidays. The latest measures, which add to existing curbs that mainly affect the unvaccinated, include limiting gatherings to 10 people starting Dec. 28. The restrictions, which Scholz negotiated with regional leaders on Tuesday, also apply to those who are inoculated or have recovered from the virus. "We can't close our eyes to the next wave that's beginning to appear in front of us," Scholz told reporters in Berlin after meeting the country's 16 state premiers. The chancellor said Germans should celebrate Christmas, but cautiously.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-21/germany-to-impose-tighter-curbs-as-nation-braces-for-omicron>