

COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

18th Feb 2022

Lockdown Exit

Vulnerable to Covid, High-Risk Americans Feel Left Behind

Millions of Americans with weakened immune systems, disabilities or illnesses that make them especially vulnerable to the coronavirus have lived totally isolated since March 2020, sequestering at home, keeping their children out of school and skipping medical care rather than risk exposure to the virus. And they have seethed over talk from politicians and public health experts that they perceive as minimizing the value of their lives. As Year 3 of the pandemic approaches, with public support for precautions plummeting and governors of even the most liberal states moving to shed mask mandates, they find themselves coping with exhaustion and grief, rooted in the sense that their neighbors and leaders are willing to accept them as collateral damage in a return to normalcy.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/us/high-risk-covid-immunocompromised.html>

Coronavirus restrictions ease across Europe despite high case rates

France's nightclubs reopen for the first time in three months on Wednesday and the Netherlands returns to "almost normal" from next Friday, as European countries continue to lift their coronavirus curbs despite relatively high infection numbers. Groups may also play to standing audiences in French concert venues, customers in bars and cafes will be allowed to eat and drink while standing at the counter and cinemagoers and train passengers can snack during their film or journey. "The skies seem finally to be clearing," said the French government's official spokesperson, Gabriel Attal, adding that restrictions "can be lifted according to schedule" but urging people to continue to exercise caution and restraint.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/16/coronavirus-restrictions-ease-across-europe-despite-high-case-rates>

Some immunocompromised Canadians face anxious future with lifting of COVID-19 restrictions

Joel Bhikoo has multiple sclerosis, needs an IV infusion of medication every six months and for the most part has been isolating himself since the COVID-19 pandemic hit nearly two years ago. Bhikoo is just one of thousands of Canadians whose medical condition has put them more at risk for developing complications in case of infection from COVID-19. And some of them are now facing a more anxious future as many provinces, in an attempt to get things back to normal or learn to live with COVID-19, announce the lifting of measures.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/immunocompromised-canadians-restrictions-covid-19-1.6347743>

Japan Lifts Covid-19 Ban on Foreigners' Entry, but Scars Remain

Japan said Thursday that it would reopen its border to a limited number of overseas students, workers and business travelers after a three-month ban that left scars on the country's relations with foreigners. The ban has been popular among voters and helped Prime Minister Fumio Kishida maintain healthy poll ratings during an Omicron infection wave. Opponents included Japanese business leaders and foreign students, who said the severe steps harked back to the country's centuries of isolation from the 1600s through the 1850s.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-lifts-covid-19-ban-on-foreigners-entry-but-scars-remain-11645093890>

As states drop COVID-19 restrictions, some experts warn it's premature to declare victory

After months of unrelenting surges, COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations are falling rapidly

across the US, a welcome reprieve for many Americans, who are hoping that the decline will herald the beginning of the end of a difficult two years and a return to a much-awaited normalcy. Although COVID-19 infections remain at levels comparable to prior peaks, with an average of 147,000 new cases still reported each day, politicians across the country, sensing the public pandemic fatigue, are eagerly moving to lift restrictions. Although health experts agree the COVID-19 decline is encouraging, many are urging caution not to declare victory prematurely out of fear of a potential viral resurgence. Many experts are also expressing concern over declining data availability.

<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/states-drop-covid-19-restrictions-experts-warn-premature/story?id=82835845>

Switzerland lifts almost all COVID-19 restrictions

The Swiss government will lift nearly all pandemic restrictions from midnight Thursday, amid confidence that COVID-19 infection rates had been successfully uncoupled from hospitalizations. People in Switzerland will no longer have to show COVID certificates in restaurants, bars or other venues like theaters and concert halls. But self-isolation for those infected with COVID-19 will remain in force until the end of March, as will the requirement to wear masks while visiting health care facilities and on public transport.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/switzerland-lifts-almost-all-covid-19-restrictions/>

How to move: exercising after having Covid-19

The Omicron variant has caused an avalanche of Covid-19 cases in Australia in the past months. While most people who catch the disease experience mild symptoms, many report feeling short of breath and sluggish for weeks afterward. "It's normal to feel tired after a viral infection, and everyone's recovery is different," says Janet Bondarenko, a senior respiratory physiotherapist at Alfred hospital in Melbourne. "But the severity of your Covid illness doesn't necessarily predict whether you will have those lingering symptoms." The coronavirus can damage various organs, causing ongoing fatigue, says Dr Robert Newton, professor of exercise medicine at Edith Cowan University. "The cardiorespiratory system can't deliver oxygen to the working muscles efficiently. So what was a light to moderate intensity activity previously feels quite vigorous now."

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/feb/17/how-to-move-exercising-after-having-covid-19>

Fauci says time to start 'inching' back toward normality

Top U.S. infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci said that it is time for the United States to start inching back towards normality, despite remaining risks from COVID-19. Fauci said U.S. states are facing tough choices in their efforts to balance the need to protect their citizens from infections and the growing fatigue with a pandemic that has dragged into its third year. "There is no perfect solution to this," said Fauci, President Joe Biden's top medical adviser and a member of the White House COVID-19 Response Team.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/fauci-says-time-start-inching-back-toward-normality-2022-02-16/>

Portugal drops most COVID-19 rules as Omicron ebbs

As an Omicron-fuelled wave of infections ebbs, Portugal said on Thursday it would drop most of its remaining coronavirus rules, including the requirement to show the COVID-19 digital pass to stay at hotels or a negative test to enter nightclubs. "This is a very important moment," Cabinet Minister Mariana Vieira da Silva told a news conference. "This is another a step towards a return to normal life." The new measures will come into force in the next few days, Vieira da Silva said, as they need still the final stamp of approval from the president.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/portugal-drops-most-covid-19-rules-omicron-ebbs-2022-02-17/>

Australian unemployment holds at 13-year low as Omicron hits hours

Australia's unemployment rate held at a 13-year low in January as a surge in coronavirus cases took more of a toll on hours worked than on jobs, and hiring still rising moderately in the month. Figures

from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on Thursday showed employment rose 12,900 in January, pipping forecasts of a flat outcome and following two months of exceptional gains. The unemployment rate stayed at 4.2%, matching the lowest reading since 2008 when it bottomed out at 4.0%. The impact of the Omicron wave was felt most in hours worked which slid 8.8% as employees stayed home sick or were forced to isolate.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-jobs-growth-slows-jan-omicron-hits-hours-2022-02-17/>

Estimated 73% of US now immune to omicron: Is that enough?

The omicron wave that assaulted the United States this winter also bolstered its defenses, leaving enough protection against the coronavirus that future spikes will likely require much less — if any — dramatic disruption to society. Millions of individual Americans' immune systems now recognize the virus and are primed to fight it off if they encounter omicron, or even another variant. About half of eligible Americans have received booster shots, there have been nearly 80 million confirmed infections overall and many more infections have never been reported. One influential model uses those factors and others to estimate that 73% of Americans are, for now, immune to omicron, the dominant variant, and that could rise to 80% by mid-March.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-united-states-3e7ab3f74080bac8480aa6de3e65eccc>

Exit Strategies

CDC contemplating change to mask guidance in coming weeks

The leading US health officials said on Wednesday that the nation is moving closer to the point that Covid-19 is no longer a "constant crisis" as more cities, businesses and sports venues began lifting pandemic restrictions around the country. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director Rochelle Walensky said during a White House briefing that the government is contemplating a change to its mask guidance in the coming weeks. Noting recent declines in Covid-19 cases, hospital admissions and deaths, she acknowledged "people are so eager" for health officials to ease masking rules and other measures designed to stop the spread of the coronavirus. "We all share the same goal - to get to a point where Covid-19 is no longer disrupting our daily lives, a time when it won't be a constant crisis - rather something we can prevent, protect against, and treat," Walensky said.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/16/cdc-change-update-covid-mask-guidance>

US parents of under-fives clamor for off-label use over Covid vaccine delays

When providers sign an agreement to provide Covid-19 vaccine shots, they also agree not to give the vaccine off-label, or use it for purposes other than what it was approved to do. In this case, the Moderna vaccine is approved for adults aged 18 and up, and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is approved for those aged 16 and up. But the vaccines are still under emergency use authorizations for younger patients. Providers who give off-label vaccinations in the US may not be protected by legislation that keeps them from being held liable in the case of a rare adverse event.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/under-five-covid-vaccine-parents-off-label-use>

COVID-19: Mass testing and lockdown plans in Hong Kong criticised as 'ridiculous nonsense' by expert

Hong Kong may test a million people each day, local media has reported, as the city struggles to contain its omicron wave. But an expert has told Sky News it would be "ridiculous nonsense" to conduct mass testing. The government will also aim to secure 10,000 hotel rooms for COVID-19 patients. Overwhelmed hospitals have been treating patients in stretchers on the streets due to a lack of capacity. The city confirmed 6,116 confirmed cases today, another record high, and 24 deaths

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-mass-testing-and-lockdown-plans-in-hong-kong-criticised-as-ridiculous-nonsense-by-expert-12544076>

Covid-19 news: 5-to-11-year-olds in England to get vaccines from April

Children aged between five and 11 in England will be able to get a covid jab. All five to 11-year-olds in England will be offered a low-dose Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine. It follows months of deliberations by the Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisation (JCVI). The JCVI reportedly decided that vaccinating children in this age group is beneficial, but of less benefit than for older age groups. This is partly because children are less likely to become severely ill from covid-19 and also because many children have already caught the virus. However, vaccinating children soon should prevent a certain number from developing severe illness in future waves of infection. The JCVI estimates that vaccinating one million children will prevent 98 hospitalisations if the next covid wave is severe, and about 17 hospitalisations if the next wave is relatively mild like omicron.

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2237475-covid-19-news-5-to-11-year-olds-in-england-to-get-vaccines-from-april/>

Japan eases strict border controls criticised by business, educators

Japan will ease border controls imposed to counter the pandemic, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Thursday, softening measures that have been among the strictest imposed by wealthy nations and have been slammed by business and educators. About 150,000 foreign students have been kept out of Japan, along with workers desperately needed by an ageing nation with a shrinking population, prompting warnings of labour shortages and damage to its international reputation. From March, authorities will raise the number of people allowed to enter to 5,000 a day, from 3,500 now, Kishida told a news conference.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-set-announce-easing-strict-border-measures-2022-02-17/>

U.S. officials prepare for pandemic's next phase as Omicron wanes

U.S. health officials said on Wednesday they are preparing for the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic as Omicron-related cases decline, including updating CDC guidance on mask-wearing and shoring up U.S. testing capacity. The plans come as a growing number of U.S. states have begun to ease COVID-19 restrictions as cases decline. The seven-day average of daily cases dropped 40% from the previous week, while the daily hospital admission average dropped 28% and the average daily deaths dropped 9%, according to CDC data. "We're moving toward a time when COVID isn't a crisis, but is something we can protect against and treat.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-cdc-weighs-new-guidance-masks-still-key-some-cases-chief-says-2022-02-16/>

Hong Kong considers mass testing as COVID fight intensifies

Hong Kong's coronavirus battle intensified on Thursday as authorities reported that new cases had multiplied by 60 times so far this month, and the city's leader said city-wide testing was being considered in the global financial hub. Hospitals have been overwhelmed with some patients, including the elderly, left lying on beds outside in chilly, sometimes rainy weather, in shocking scenes that prompted an apology from authorities in the Chinese-controlled city. Schools, gyms, cinemas and most public venues are shut and many office employees are working from home. But many residents are fatigued by the harsh restrictions imposed to protect against the pandemic, even as most other major cities in the world adjust to living with the virus.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-leader-asks-residents-remain-confident-support-covid-restrictions-2022-02-17/>

China's 'Zero-Covid' Policy Holds Lessons for Other Nations

Ever since China adopted its policy of stamping out every Covid-19 infection, outsiders have wondered whether it could last. With each new, more infectious variant, "zero Covid" has required more vigilant and frequent crackdowns on daily activity. And yet it has lasted. And seen from inside China, the results are remarkable. Foreigners in Beijing for the Olympics may be confined to a dystopian bubble in constant fear of being quarantined. But outside the bubble, life in the city looks

close to normal with stores, museums and offices operating and subway and road traffic in line with this time of year in 2019. Americans only now are moving on from the coronavirus. Most Chinese did so back in 2020.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-zero-covid-policy-holds-lessons-for-other-nations-11645033130>

U.K. to Offer Pfizer's Covid Shot to All Children Aged 5 to 11

Children aged 5 to 11 in England will be offered Covid-19 vaccinations to widen protection for the population as the government moves to scrap remaining pandemic restrictions. The National Health Service will make shots available to children across that age group starting in April, so “parents can, if they want, take up the offer to increase protection against potential future waves of Covid-19,” U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid said in a statement Wednesday. Javid said most young children are generally at very low risk of serious illness from Covid and the priority remains for the NHS to provide vaccines and boosters to adults and vulnerable young people, and catch-up with other childhood immunization programs delayed by the pandemic.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-16/u-k-to-offer-pfizer-s-covid-shot-to-all-children-aged-5-to-11>

Germany Moves to Unwind Covid Curbs as Pandemic Risks Subside

Germany will reopen nightclubs and ease restrictions on stores and restaurants as part of a three-step plan to unwind pandemic-related restrictions, joining the wave of countries scaling back emergency measures. Europe’s largest economy aims to lift most curbs by March 20, taking a more cautious approach than many of its neighbors. The move was agreed on Wednesday after talks with Chancellor Olaf Scholz and state leaders and comes just days after Germany posted record infection levels. Germany’s outbreak started to recede in recent days and the improving outlook prompted calls from across the political spectrum to follow countries like the U.K., Ireland and Denmark in easing restrictions.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-16/germany-moves-to-unwind-covid-curbs-as-pandemic-risks-subside>

Japan set to announce easing of strict border measures

Article reports that Japan will ease border controls imposed to counter the pandemic, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Thursday, softening measures that have been among the strictest imposed by wealthy nations and have been slammed by business and educators. About 150,000 foreign students have been kept out of Japan, along with workers desperately needed by an ageing nation with a shrinking population, prompting warnings of labour shortages and damage to its international reputation

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-set-announce-easing-strict-border-measures-2022-02-17/>

Partisan Exits

Hundreds of Aussie mining workers set to lose jobs over vaccine mandate

Hundreds of BHP workers across Australia are being forced to quit or lose their jobs after the mining giant won a legal challenge to enforce its COVID-19 vaccine mandate. The company expects up to 700 employees, or 3 per cent of its staff, will choose not to be vaccinated, effectively leaving the business, The Australian reports. The rule came into place from January 31 after unions lost a legal challenge fighting the mandate. Under BHP workplace rules, anyone who does not show proof of vaccination will not be permitted on sites and their positions are currently under review. Unvaccinated contractors will also be unable to work with BHP. The mining giant has joined other major Australian companies, such as Bunnings, Qantas and Telstra to implement the measures.

<https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-update-hundreds-of-bhp-workers-to-lose-jobs-over-vaccine-mandate/5e1884b0-215b-418a-82c7-7aae69720ab4>

The last of Canada's Covid-19 demonstrations may end soon as Ottawa police warn of

consequences of staying

A nearly three-week protest in Ottawa over mandated Covid-19 precautions in Canada may be approaching its end as police tell demonstrators to either leave immediately or face legal consequences. "You must leave the area now," the Ottawa Police Service said in a statement to protesters Wednesday. "Anyone blocking streets or assisting others in the blocking (of) streets, are committing a criminal offence and you may be arrested." Many demonstrators have vowed to hold out for as long as necessary, and the federal government has moved to enact emergency powers to freeze financial support of the protests despite opposition in Parliament. Beginning with a group of truckers arriving in Ottawa in late January objecting to a vaccine mandate, the protest has morphed into a general airing of grievances against all Covid-19 safety protocols.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/17/americas/canada-trucker-protests-covid-thursday/index.html>

Fake COVID-19 vaccination certificates used by Australians to beat mandates and enter venues

Unvaccinated Australians are using fake certificates to gain entry to venues the government banned them from at the beginning of this month. The services were first identified late last year, but they are gaining prominence in online forums among people opposed to vaccine mandates in Australia. The ABC has seen one such website, hosted in Russia, that generates highly convincing fakes. It includes an animation that mimics the green tick and a moving Australian coat of arms, and a clock supposedly counting down the time from login.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-02-17/fake-covid-19-vaccination-certificates-used-to-beat-jab-mandates/100839824>

Canada police threaten protesters with arrest; government links blockade to extremists

Police in the Canadian capital Ottawa on Wednesday warned truck drivers blockading the downtown core to depart or face arrest in crackdown seeking to end a three-week-old protest over COVID restrictions. Interim Police Chief Steve Bell vowed "to take back the entirety of the downtown core and every occupied space" in "coming days." Federal Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino accused extremist groups of helping organize protests in Ottawa and at U.S. border crossings and repeated suggestions that some actors wanted to overthrow the Liberal government.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canadian-government-wants-quickly-clear-covid-protest-blockades-ottawa-2022-02-16/>

Truckers brace for a police crackdown in besieged Ottawa

Hundreds of truckers clogging the streets of Canada's capital stood their ground and defiantly blasted their horns Thursday as police poured in, threatening to break up the nearly three-week protest against the country's COVID-19 restrictions. Busloads of police officers arrived near Ottawa's Parliament Hill, and workers put up extra fences around government buildings. "The action is imminent," said interim Ottawa Police Chief Steve Bell. "We absolutely are committed to end this unlawful demonstration." Police continued negotiating with the protesters and trying to persuade them to go home, Bell said. "We want this demonstration to end peacefully," he said, but added: "If they do not peacefully leave, we have plans."

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-canada-ontario-ottawa-c9d1b0d9d29625eff62d4be8e8d3c259>

Continued Lockdown

Hong Kong Exodus Forces Market Watchdog Staff Into 12-Hour Days

Now even Hong Kong's top market regulator is warning the city's development as an international financial center is at risk. After years of political upheaval and a deepening isolation because of Hong Kong's zero-Covid strategy, the Securities and Futures Commission is struggling to police the city's \$6.3 trillion market. Grappling with a brain drain due to emigration and job switches, the

watchdog lost 12% of its employees last year, including 25% of its junior professional staff, forcing those remaining to work 12-hour days to cover the workload, according to former employees. In a budget statement submitted this month to the city's legislature, where it asked for approval to boost pay after a one-year salary freeze, the SFC said: "Without the appropriate number and mix of staff, the commission will not be able to deliver on the various initiatives underpinning Hong Kong's development as an IFC."

https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-16/hong-kong-market-watchdog-warns-on-exodus-threat-to-finance-hub?utm_source=google&utm_medium=bd&cmpld=google

Scientific Viewpoint

Moderna's Covid-19 vaccine gets authorisation in Australia for children

Moderna has reported that its Covid-19 vaccine, Spikevax (mRNA-1273), obtained provisional registration from the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) in Australia for active immunisation to prevent Covid-19 in children of the age six to 11 years. The authorised dosage of the messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) vaccine is a 50µg dose to be administered as a two-dose regimen. Spikevax was analysed in the ongoing, observer-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled, expansion Phase II KidCOVE clinical trial.

<https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/news/moderna-vaccine-australia-children/>

Hybrid immunity offers increased protection that is longer-lasting against Covid-19 reinfection, studies show

Pfizer/BioNTech's Covid-19 mRNA vaccine provides an added layer of protection against reinfection for people who have been previously infected with Covid-19, as well as increased immune durability over time, according to two studies published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine. The studies offer more insight into the concept of hybrid immunity: when previously infected people, who have "natural immunity," then get vaccine-acquired immunity. One of the studies, conducted out of Israel, found that amongst people who had recovered from Covid-19 infections, reinfections were over four times more common in those who did not receive vaccines than in those who did after the primary infection.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/16/health/hybrid-immunity-studies/index.html>

Pfizer and BioNTech Omicron-targeted vaccine delayed - BioNTech CEO

Delivery of Pfizer and BioNTech SE's vaccine to combat the Omicron COVID-19 variant was delayed by several weeks due to a slower-than expected data gathering process, BioNTech Chief Executive Ugur Sahin told Germany's Bild on Thursday. Once the vaccine is ready, the company would assess whether it was still needed, Sahin said. "If the wave ends, that does not mean it can't begin again," he told Bild in a video interview, adding that BioNTech was in a position to continue creating new vaccines as variants emerged if needed.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/pfizer-biontech-omicron-targeted-vaccine-delayed-biontech-ceo-2022-02-16/>

Moderna patent application raises fears for Africa COVID vaccine hub

Moderna Inc has applied for patents in South Africa relating to its COVID-19 vaccine, prompting fears the company could eventually seek to prevent a new African vaccine manufacturing hub from making its own version of the mRNA shot. Moderna spokesperson Colleen Hussey confirmed it had filed for patents "related to both the COVID-19 vaccine and Moderna's platform technology" in South Africa and elsewhere, after a group of 60 Africa-based charities raised concerns about them, but said the move would not block vaccine distribution in Africa. She reiterated Moderna's October 2020 pledge not to enforce its COVID-19 related patents during the coronavirus pandemic.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/moderna-patent-application-raises-fears-africa-covid-vaccine-hub-2022-02-17/>

South Africa's health regulator allows use of Merck COVID treatment pill

South Africa's government said it was not planning to buy Merck's COVID-19 treatment pill molnupiravir on Thursday for cost reasons, despite the drug gaining approval from the country's health regulator. Molnupiravir and a rival antiviral pill from Pfizer called Paxlovid have demonstrated efficacy in trials of adults with COVID-19 who are at high risk of serious illness and are now both in use. Countries around the world are negotiating prices with Merck and Pfizer. The U.S. government is paying \$700 for each course of molnupiravir, but generic drugmakers will make cheap versions in a deal aimed at giving access to poorer nations

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/south-africas-health-regulator-approves-merck-covid-treatment-pill-2022-02-17/>

Covid Survivors Deal With Mental-Health Issues Months After Infection

Early Covid-19 survivors were at higher risk of anxiety, depression and a raft of other mental health problems up to a year after their infections, according to a large U.S. study that widens the scope of the pandemic's economic and societal impact. Even patients who were never sick enough to be hospitalized for Covid were still 68% more likely than their non-infected counterparts to be diagnosed with a sleep disorder, 69% more likely to have an anxiety disorder, and 77% more likely to have a depressive disorder. The relative risk of developing the conditions was significantly higher still in patients hospitalized for Covid, and translates into dozens of additional mental health conditions for every 1,000 coronavirus cases.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-16/mental-health-scars-stay-with-survivors-long-after-covid-battle>

'Game-Changer' Pfizer Pill Is Easier to Find as Omicron Fades Away

As the omicron wave peaked in the U.S. last month, the first-line treatment for high-risk patients with early Covid dangled out of reach for most. Only a trickle of the new Paxlovid pill from Pfizer Inc. was reaching hospitals and pharmacies. Now, as cases plummet nationwide and the company continues to deliver hundreds of thousands of doses ordered by the federal government to pharmacies, Paxlovid is starting to look downright plentiful. Doctors and health officials in New York, Boston, Colorado and other areas where the omicron wave has receded report that supply seems to be meeting the softening demand. "We've seen such a rapid decline in Covid cases that it's not as needed anymore," said Asif Merchant, who chairs the Massachusetts Medical Society's committee on geriatrics. "Having the availability three or four weeks ago would have made a tremendous amount of difference."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-16/game-changer-pfizer-pill-easier-to-get-as-omicron-fades-away>

Omicron Sub-Variant BA.2 No More Severe Than First Strain: South African Study

The rapidly spreading omicron BA.2 subvariant doesn't cause significantly more severe disease than the original version, according to a South African study that appears to allay fears it causes harsher illness. Patients infected with the new subvariant suffered from similar rates of severe disease and hospitalization as those with the original omicron strain, according to researchers from the country's National Institute for Communicable Diseases that analyzed data from a large hospital group and the government laboratory service, looking at almost 100,000 cases. The emergence of BA.2 has caused widespread concern as it appears to be even more transmissible than the original omicron strain that was first identified in South Africa and has since spread around the world, leading to waves of infections in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere. The study indicates that, like the original version, BA.2 is relatively mild in comparison with earlier dominant strains, such as delta.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-16/study-shows-omicron-sub-variant-no-more-severe-than-first-strain>

Moderna eyes COVID booster by August, not clear yet if Omicron-specific needed

An Omicron-specific booster could be ready by August, the CEO of U.S. biotech firm Moderna

(MRNA.O) told Reuters, but the firm is still gathering clinical data to determine whether that vaccine would offer better protection than a new dose of the existing jab. Last month Moderna began clinical trials for a booster dose specifically designed to target Omicron but initial results from studies in monkeys show the Omicron-specific shot may not offer stronger protection than a new dose of the existing vaccine

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/moderna-eyes-covid-booster-by-august-not-clear-yet-if-omicron-specific-needed-2022-02-16/>

Coronavirus Resurgence

Solomon Islands coronavirus outbreak causing growing concern

With the first community outbreak of the coronavirus in the Solomon Islands spreading rapidly through the largely unvaccinated population, the Red Cross warned Thursday that the Pacific Island nation's fragile health care system is at risk of becoming overwhelmed. The capital Honiara has only one small hospital and authorities have already turned a sports building into a field hospital and a football stadium into a vaccination center, said Clement Manuri, secretary general of the Solomon Islands Red Cross Society. "What's currently happening is they are trying to keep only people who are really sick with COVID-19, with difficulty breathing, in those facilities," Manuri told The Associated Press in an interview from Honiara. "Otherwise the advice is for people who have tested positive to self-isolate in their homes."

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/solomon-islands-pacific-island-tonga-bangkok-red-cross-b2017187.html>

Rapid COVID-19 home tests surge in India, experts flag risks

On New Year's Eve, the Indian government wrote to states encouraging them to promote the use of COVID-19 home tests, especially for people who are experiencing symptoms, in a bid to avoid straining local health systems. During last year's delta-driven surge, an explosion in cases overwhelmed hospitals and testing labs. But last month, as new infections fueled by the omicron variant skyrocketed, so did the number of people testing themselves at home across India. In the first 20 days of January, around 200,000 people shared their test results with India's health agency – a 66-fold increase compared to all of 2021. The strategy apparently worked. Those testing positive with speedy, though less accurate tests were told to self-isolate at home, allowing hospital beds to remain available for the most vulnerable.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/india-new-delhi-covid-people-pcr-test-b2017010.html>

Covid-19 infections down overall but mixed picture across UK

Covid-19 infections have fallen slightly in England and Wales, but the trend is uncertain in Scotland and Northern Ireland, figures suggest. There is still a high prevalence of the virus across the country, with infections remaining above pre-Christmas levels. Numbers are down overall for the UK, however. Around one in 20 people in private households in England had Covid-19 in the week to February 12, or 2.4 million people – down from one in 19, or 2.8 million people, in the week to February 5.

<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/ons-northern-ireland-scotland-wales-england-b982921.html>

Hong Kong's COVID fight intensifies as cases multiply by 60 times

Hong Kong's coronavirus battle intensified on Thursday as authorities reported that new cases had multiplied by 60 times so far this month, and the city's leader said city-wide testing was being considered in the global financial hub. Hospitals have been overwhelmed with some patients, including the elderly, left lying on beds outside in chilly, sometimes rainy weather, in shocking scenes that prompted an apology from authorities in the Chinese-controlled city.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-leader-asks-residents-remain-confident-support-covid-restrictions-2022-02-17/>

Beijing Olympics reports no new COVID cases for first time

No new cases of COVID-19 were reported inside the Beijing Olympics "closed loop" on Thursday for the first time, a win for organisers who have gone to extreme measures to prevent the Games from seeding an outbreak that leaks into the public. The Beijing Games have taken place inside a bubble, without paying spectators and with all participants - athletes, team officials, media, volunteers and staff - tested daily. Some overseas analysts warned that the Winter Games would put further pressure on China's "zero-COVID" stance, especially as authorities battled the new and more infectious Omicron.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/beijing-2022-olympics-organiser-reports-zero-new-covid-19-cases-feb-16-2022-02-17/>