

COVID surges across Europe as France reports 179k cases

France reported a record high of 179,807 new confirmed coronavirus cases in a 24-hour period today, one of the highest one-day tallies worldwide since the start of the pandemic.

It is the highest number of new daily infections in Europe.

Since the start of the pandemic, only the United States and India have reported average daily new cases above 200,000.

Yesterday, the United States reported more than 505,000 new COVID-19 cases.

Britain today reported a record 129,471 new cases, but the data did not include figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland due to differences in reporting practices over the Christmas period.

France's previous record of 104,611 was set on Saturday, after the 86,852 high of 11 November, 2020 was broken with two consecutive days of more than 90,000 new cases per day at the end of last week.

The seven-day moving average of new cases in France - which smoothes out daily reporting irregularities - rose to a new all-time high of 87,500. On Sunday and Monday, the health ministry reported only about 30,000 new cases per day.

On Monday, the government announced new measures to curb infections, including limits on the size of big gatherings, a ban on eating and drinking in transport systems and the mandatory wearing of masks again outdoors.

Despite the jump in new cases, the number of patients in hospital with COVID-19 remained well below record levels, with Covid-19 patients in intensive care up by 83 to 3,416 today, well below the highs of more than 7,000 in early April 2020.

Meanwhile, France will pay intensive care nurses an extra €100 per month from January as it seeks to improve work conditions for staff exhausted by the fight against COVID-19, Prime Minister Jean Castex said.

"This is about improving attractiveness, training, qualification, working conditions in intensive care units, acknowledging the skills of those who work there," Mr. Castex said during a visit to an intensive care unit in Creteil, near Paris.

The bonus comes ahead of a broader set of measures that will be unveiled next week by Health Minister Olivier Veran to stem shortages of staff on the frontline of the COVID-19 fight.

The rapid spread of the Omicron variant has seen a record number of cases surge in France, putting extra pressure on intensive care units in public hospitals.

Unvaccinated to be blocked from entering Finland

Finland has announced it will block entry for foreign travellers who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19, as it steps up its fight against the Omicron variant.

Only foreign travellers with a negative COVID-19 test who can prove full vaccination or past infection will now be allowed to enter, the interior ministry announced after a government meeting.

A border guard spokesman confirmed to AFP that unvaccinated foreigners would be turned away unless they were on a list of exceptions that includes Finland residents, essential workers and diplomats.

The measure also affects EU nationals.

"Regardless of the foreign citizen's origin, everyone must present a vaccination certificate and a negative test less than 48 hours old," said Tomi Kivenjuuri of the border guard.

The measure came into force today and follows weeks of toughening border measures across the European Union.

Madrid's free COVID tests strain under demand

Demand for free COVID-19 testing kits provided by Madrid's regional government far outstripped supply today, with long queues forming outside pharmacies in what has become a common scene since the Omicron variant began driving up infection.

Madrid-based pharmacist Cristina Sanchez said she had only received 20 test kits

to distribute today as part of a plan to reinforce supply after pharmacies started running out of paid tests, but there were already more than 30 people waiting outside when she opened.

As the first few people in line tend to take several tests each, most have to return home empty handed or buy kits for €9, which were also selling out fast.

Fuelled by the highly contagious Omicron variant, cases in Spain have soared in the past month, pushing the national 14-day incidence to a record 1,206 cases per 100,000 people on Monday, a five-fold rise since the beginning of December.

Despite the surge, hospital admissions and intensive-care occupancy remain well below the peaks of last January.

The government brought back mandatory outdoor mask wearing last week but has not attempted to reimpose any tougher national restrictions.

However, regional administrations, which are responsible for implementing their own health policy, have introduced measures ranging from a night curfew in Catalonia to limits on social gatherings and bar opening times.

Madrid, whose conservative government has put supporting the hospitality sector at the top of its political agenda, is opting for increased testing and no restrictions on socializing.

Closure of cultural venues suspended by Belgian court

A Belgian court has suspended the closure of cultural venues, including theatres, a measure announced last week to stem the spread of the Omicron COVID-19 variant.

The decision – which will not immediately lead to the reopening of cinemas – came after protests from the country's hard-hit cultural sector that it was being unfairly singled out.

A ruling from Belgium's highest administrative court said the authorities had not demonstrated "in what way entertainment venues are particularly dangerous places for (people's) health... in that they would spread coronavirus, to the extent necessary to order their closure".

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo announced the original measure on 22 December as Belgium saw a sharp increase in the percentage of tests showing the Omicron variant.

That came despite an overall drop off in COVID-19 infections since a peak at the start of the month as the country battled a fourth wave that strained hospitals.

Police in Brussels estimated that some 5,000 people took to the streets on Sunday to protest the closure of cultural venues.

The authorities were accused of targeting the sector as bars and restaurants were allowed to keep trading. The decision to reverse the government's closure order came after a complaint was lodged by a theatre producer in the capital.

Cinemas and other venues including bowling alleys and casinos were not included – but the authorities are facing similar challenges that could see more locations allowed to reopen in the coming days.

Several prominent theatres and cinemas had decided to remain open in defiance of the measure.

Source: <https://www.rte.ie/news/coronavirus/2021/1228/1268989-europe-covid/>

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