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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Sounds Alarm Over Looming Omicron Surge

Cases could pass 100,000 a day if the country does not slow spread of the highly transmissible variant.

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Evacuation flight passengers undergo disinfection upon their arrival from Kazakhstan. **Anton Novoderezhkin / TASS**

Russia is set to face a new surge of coronavirus infections in the coming days as the Omicron variant sweeps through an under-vaccinated population, health officials warned this week.

Several leading officials issued a series of bleak warnings in televised remarks Tuesday and Wednesday, saying infection rates could surge to new record highs and urging for the healthcare system to be readied for another influx of patients.

Omicron infections tripled during Russia's extended New Year holidays, said Anna Popova, the head of the Rospotrebnadzor consumer health watchdog which is leading Russia's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Infections could pass 100,000 a day in an "unfavorable scenario," Popova added.

Russia's record number of daily infections so far stands at 41,335, set on Nov. 6.

Russian President Vladimir Putin echoed those concerns Wednesday, saying Russia has just a "few weeks" to prepare for a new wave of infections.

Related article: Russia Says Developing Sputnik Omicron Booster

The country, which has the highest official fatality count in Europe, has been accused of undercounting Covid-19 cases and deaths. Analysis of mortality data shows Russia has recorded at least 929,000 excess deaths since the start of the pandemic — likely the world's second-highest toll after India.

Cases in the capital Moscow — which has been the first place in the country to record an increase in infections in previous waves — rose 67% on Tuesday to their highest number in two months.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said Tuesday the presence of the Omicron variant in the capital is already "significant." He warned that the city would see a major increase in infections within 7-10 days, adding that "it is quite possible that we will face a worse situation than in previous waves."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin ordered the country's hospitals and clinics to be on high alert for a possible influx of cases and to monitor stocks of key medicines.

Russia has confirmed 698 official cases of the Omicron variant, Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova said Wednesday — more than double the number reported on Tuesday. Health experts including the World Health Organization say the strain will become dominant across much of Europe, where it is spreading rapidly from west to east.

The state-run Gamaleya Institute, which developed Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, claimed in November that the vaccine is effective against Omicron and that it has begun developing an Omicron-adapted booster shot.

Just 46% of Russians are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus as vaccine skepticism has been high since the country launched its mass vaccination campaign in December 2020. Vaccination rates fell to their lowest-ever levels over the country's extended holidays at the start of January, with only 70,000 jabs being administered per day, officials said Tuesday.

The country recently abandoned plans to require health passes — proving vaccination, a recent infection or negative PCR test — for access to interregional trains and flights after a fierce public backlash, and restrictions remain limited. In a number of regions people are required to present a valid QR code to enter public spaces, such as restaurants and shopping centers, though not in the capital Moscow.

Update: This article was updated Wednesday to include comments made by Putin and Golikova, and new figures on Omicron cases.

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