

UK calls for volunteers to battle wave of omicron infections

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British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is calling for thousands of volunteers to staff new vaccination centers in shopping areas, stadiums and racecourses as the government accelerates its booster program to

combat the omicron variant of COVID-19.

The drive comes two days after Johnson set a target of giving booster shots to all adults by the end of this year to stem the tide of omicron. U.K. health authorities say the number of omicron infections is doubling every two to three days, and the variant is now responsible for about 200,000 new cases a day.

"We need tens of thousands of people to help out – everyone from trained vaccinators to stewards," Johnson said. "Many thousands have already given their time - but we need you to come forward again, to work alongside our brilliant GPs, doctors, nurses and pharmacists, to deliver jabs and save lives."

Long lines formed Tuesday at vaccination centers across England as the National Health Service raced to meet the government's target of delivering up to 1 million shots a day, more than double the recent daily average. Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab said Tuesday that logistical issues in expanding the vaccination program would diminish over the course of the week.

"It does take a few days just to make sure we get to a steady state," Raab told the BBC, adding: "We'll keep straining every sinew to make sure we can reach that target."

Monday was the second-highest day for COVID-19 booster bookings, the National Health Service in England said. More than 650,000 appointments were booked.

"It is fantastic to see such a positive response from the public so far," said Emily Lawson, the England vaccine deployment lead at the NHS. "The data is clear—getting boosted is our best hope of protecting people against the new variant."

England's chief medical officer Professor Chris Whitty told government ministers that based on current data a "significant increase in hospitalizations" from omicron is expected.

Over the past week, an average of 811 people a day were hospitalized with COVID-19.

There are currently about 7,400 coronavirus patients in U.K. hospitals, down from a peak of more than 39,000 in mid-January. Only 10 of those have tested positive for the omicron variant.

Throughout the pandemic, one of the government's primary goals has been to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients. This is particularly important during the winter, when U.K. hospitals are often stretched by a surge in flu cases and other illnesses related to cold weather.

In an address to the nation on Sunday, Johnson said that everyone 18 and up would be offered a third vaccine dose by Dec. 31—a month earlier than the previous target. Johnson said boosters would "reinforce our wall of vaccine protection" against an anticipated "tidal wave of omicron."

U.K. health authorities say omicron, which is more transmissible than earlier variants, will become the most prevalent type of COVID-19 in Britain within days. Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers Monday that omicron would be dominant in London "within 48 hours."

Scientists in South Africa, where the omicron outbreak is more advanced, say the variant may cause less severe disease than the delta variant but caution that it's too soon to be certain. Health authorities around the world are watching Britain closely to see what an omicron surge looks like in a country with an older, more highly vaccinated population than South Africa's.

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