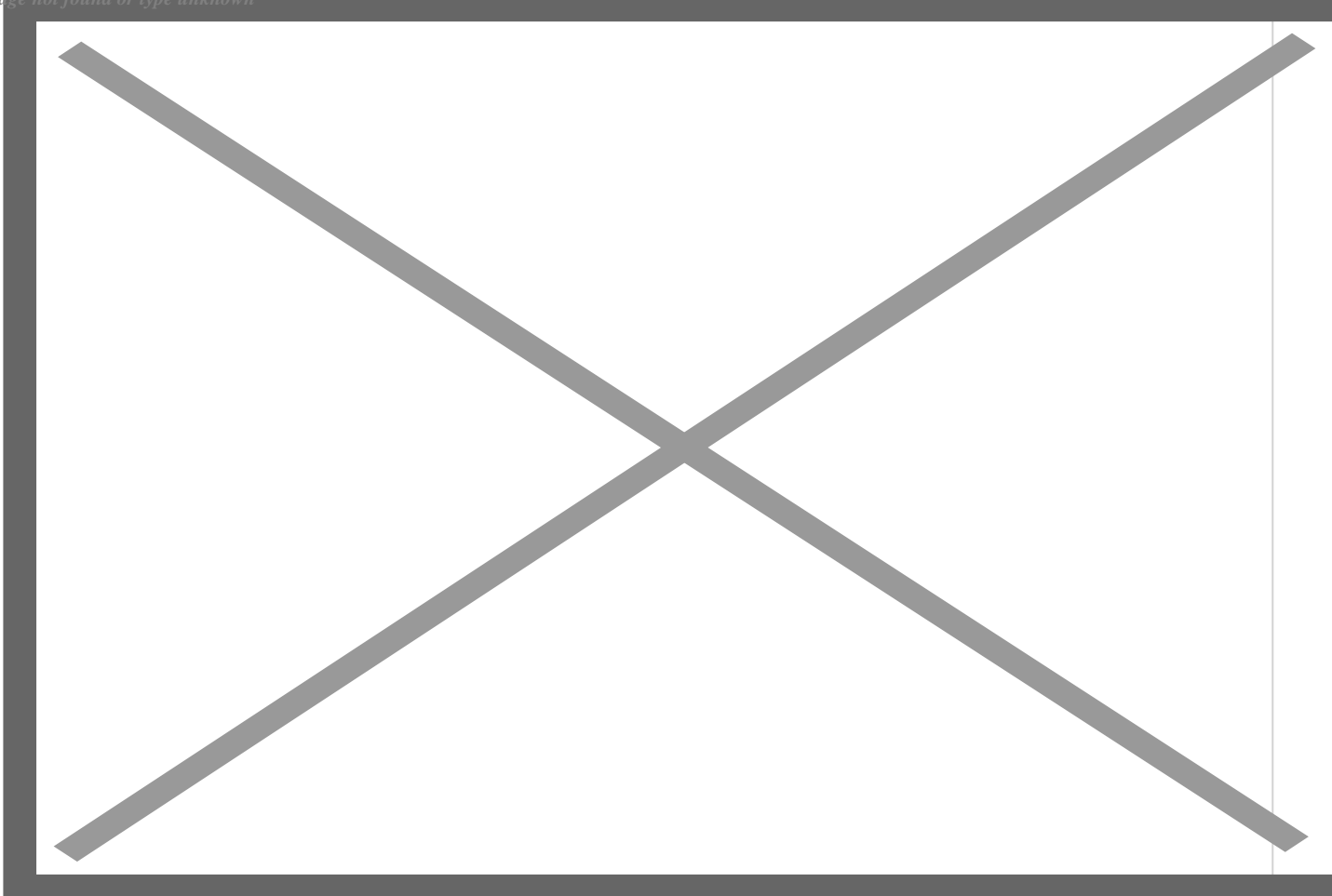


UK under pressure to reimpose restrictions as COVID cases soar

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A passenger wearing a face mask travels on the Central Line tube amid the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in London, Britain on June 15, 2020 [File: Hannah McKay/Reuters]

London, October 19 (RHC)-- Many scientists are pressing the British government to reimpose social restrictions and speed up booster vaccinations as coronavirus infection rates, already Europe's highest, rise still further.

The United Kingdom recorded 49,156 new COVID-19 cases on Monday, the largest number since mid-July. New infections averaged 43,000 a day over the past week, a 15 percent increase compared with the week before.

Last week, the Office for National Statistics estimated that one in 60 people in England had the virus, one of the highest levels seen in Britain during the pandemic.

In July, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government lifted all the legal restrictions that had been imposed more than a year earlier to slow the spread of the virus, including face coverings indoors and social distancing rules. Nightclubs and other crowded venues were allowed to open at full capacity, and people were no longer advised to work from home if they could.

Some modellers feared a big spike in cases after the reopening. That did not occur, but infections remained high, and recently have begun to increase. So have hospitalisations and deaths, which are averaging more than 100 a day – far lower than when cases were last this high, before much of the population was vaccinated, but still too high, critics of the government say.

Some say Britons have been too quick to return to pre-pandemic behaviour. Masks and social distancing are gone in most settings in England, including schools, although other parts of the UK remain a bit more strict. Even in shops, where masks are recommended, and on the London transit network, where they are mandatory, adherence is patchy.

A plan to require proof of vaccination to attend nightclubs, concerts and other mass events in England was dropped by the Conservative government amid opposition from politicians, but Scotland introduced a vaccine pass programme this month.

Some scientists say a bigger factor is waning immunity. Britain's vaccination program got off to a quick start, with shots given to the elderly and vulnerable starting last December. That means millions of people have been vaccinated for more than six months, and studies have suggested vaccines' protection gradually wanes over time.

Millions of people in Britain are being offered booster shots, but critics say the programme is moving too slowly. And while almost 80 percent of people over 12 are fully vaccinated, the number of doses delivered each day has declined sharply.

The UK also waited longer than the United States and many European nations to vaccinate children aged 12-15, and most in that age group still have not received their shots.

"It's critical we accelerate the booster programme," said epidemiologist Neil Ferguson, a member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies.

Ferguson said one factor influencing the UK's high case numbers was that it has relied heavily on the AstraZeneca vaccine, "and, while that protects very well against very severe outcomes of COVID, it protects slightly less well than Pfizer against infection and transmission, particularly in the face of the Delta variant."

He also noted that "most Western European countries have kept in place more control measures, vaccine mandates, mask-wearing mandates, and tend to have lower case numbers and certainly not case numbers which are going up as fast as we've got. "But at the end of the day this is a policy decision for government to make," he told the BBC.

Last month, the prime minister said the country might need to move to a "Plan B" – reintroducing measures such as mandatory masks and bringing in vaccine passes – if cases rose so high in the autumn and winter that the health system came under intense strain. For now, the government says it will not

change course.

Johnson's spokesman, Max Blain, said "We always knew the next few months would be challenging." But he said the government was trying to protect "both lives and livelihoods."

"Because of the protections put in place by our vaccination programme, we are able to be one of the most open economies in Europe," he said. "We believe this approach is the right one. We continue to keep it under review."

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