

UK announces first Omicron death as Britons rush for booster jabs

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People queue up at St Thomas's hospital for COVID-19 booster jabs in London, UK [Andy Rain/EPA]

London, December 14 (RHC)-- At least one person in the United Kingdom has died after contracting the Omicron variant as officials warn the new coronavirus strain is spreading at a “phenomenal” rate. As

fears of another punishing wave grip the country, Britons in their hundreds have formed queues at vaccine centres to get booster shots, heeding government advice.

“Sadly at least one patient has now been confirmed to have died with Omicron,” Prime Minister Boris Johnson told reporters on Monday. “So I think the idea that this is somehow a milder version of the virus – I think that’s something we need to set on one side – and just recognise the sheer pace at which it accelerates through the population.”

Since the first Omicron cases were detected on November 27 in the UK, Johnson has imposed tougher restrictions. On Sunday, he urged people to get a third shot to prevent the health service from being overwhelmed as he warned of a “tidal wave” of infections which could overcome even those who are fully vaccinated.

Data released on Friday showed that vaccine efficacy against symptomatic infection was substantially reduced against Omicron with just two doses, but a third dose boosted protection up to more than 70 percent.

Parliament is due to vote on Tuesday on whether to enforce further measures, which include ordering people to work from home, wear masks in public places and use COVID-19 passes for some venues.

“It’s spreading at a phenomenal rate, something that we’ve never seen before, it’s doubling every two to three days in infections,” Health Secretary Sajid Javid told Sky News on Monday, adding that the new strain accounts for about 40 percent of infections in the capital, London. “We’re once again in a race between the vaccine and the virus,” he added.

On Monday, the pound fell 0.4 percent to \$1.3225, while it was broadly steady against the euro at 85.29 pence.

Meanwhile, the National Health Service announced that the online vaccine booking system was overwhelmed, suggesting people should return at a later date. “The COVID vaccine booking service is currently facing extremely high demand so is operating a queueing system,” the National Health Service said on Twitter. “For all others experiencing waits, we would advise trying again later today or tomorrow.”

Home testing kits were also unavailable on the government’s website. The government wants to offer all adults a booster shot by New Year, an ambitious target given the Christmas holiday and that vaccinating one million people per day is almost double the current 530,000 per day. More than 146,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the UK, one of the world’s worst tolls.

Meanwhile, Johnson is grappling with a rebellion in his party over measures to curb Omicron and an outcry over alleged parties at his Downing Street office during last year’s lockdowns. The opposition and much of the public are angry as the reported parties took place when Johnson and his administration were urging people to stay at home.

After COVID-19 was first detected in China in late 2019, Johnson faced criticism for initially resisting lockdown. He has also been criticised for overseeing mistakes in transferring patients into care homes, and for building a costly test-and-trace system that failed to stop a deadly second wave.

Johnson has repeatedly said while mistakes were made, the government was making decisions at pace in the biggest public health crisis for generations and that his government was swift to roll out vaccines.

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