

WHO says quarantine can be shortened in places with high COVID cases



Geneva, February 18 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization has said countries struggling with surging COVID-19 infections may shorten the recommended quarantine duration of 14 days in some situations. The UN health agency said on Thursday its new guidelines may be helpful for places where essential services are under pressure.

“With the rapid spread of Omicron cases worldwide, contact tracing capacities of many countries have been rapidly overstretched,” a statement from the WHO said. “Given this situation, countries may consider a pragmatic approach, considering that contact tracing and quarantine requirements in the community may lead to significant disruptions of essential services, including health services.”

As an example, the WHO said the quarantine period could be shortened to 10 days without a test, and to seven days with a negative test, if the person is asymptomatic. Where testing to shorten quarantine is not possible, the absence of symptoms could be used as a proxy for testing, the agency said in its new interim guidance.

The WHO also said countries may consider relaxing their contact tracing measures in similar situations. For contacts of people infected with COVID, those at highest risk of getting infected such as healthcare workers should be prioritised, as well as those at high risk of severe disease such as people with underlying ailments or the unvaccinated, the WHO advised.

Several European countries, including Denmark and Norway, have already dropped most of their coronavirus restrictions. In the Netherlands, face masks, social distancing and health passes will no longer be required in most places later this month, and Austria, Switzerland and Germany have also announced plans to lift most COVID curbs.

In a three-stage plan, the German government agreed to lift restrictions on private indoor meetings for those vaccinated or recovered from the virus within days. Checks at non-essential stores for the proof of vaccination or a negative test result will end, but masks will still be required.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson last week said almost all COVID rules in England could be lifted by the end of the month – including the “legal requirement to self-isolate if you test positive” – a month before the planned date.

Health officials have noted that in countries with relatively high vaccination rates, the spread of Omicron has not led to a substantial increase in hospitalisation and death rates.

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