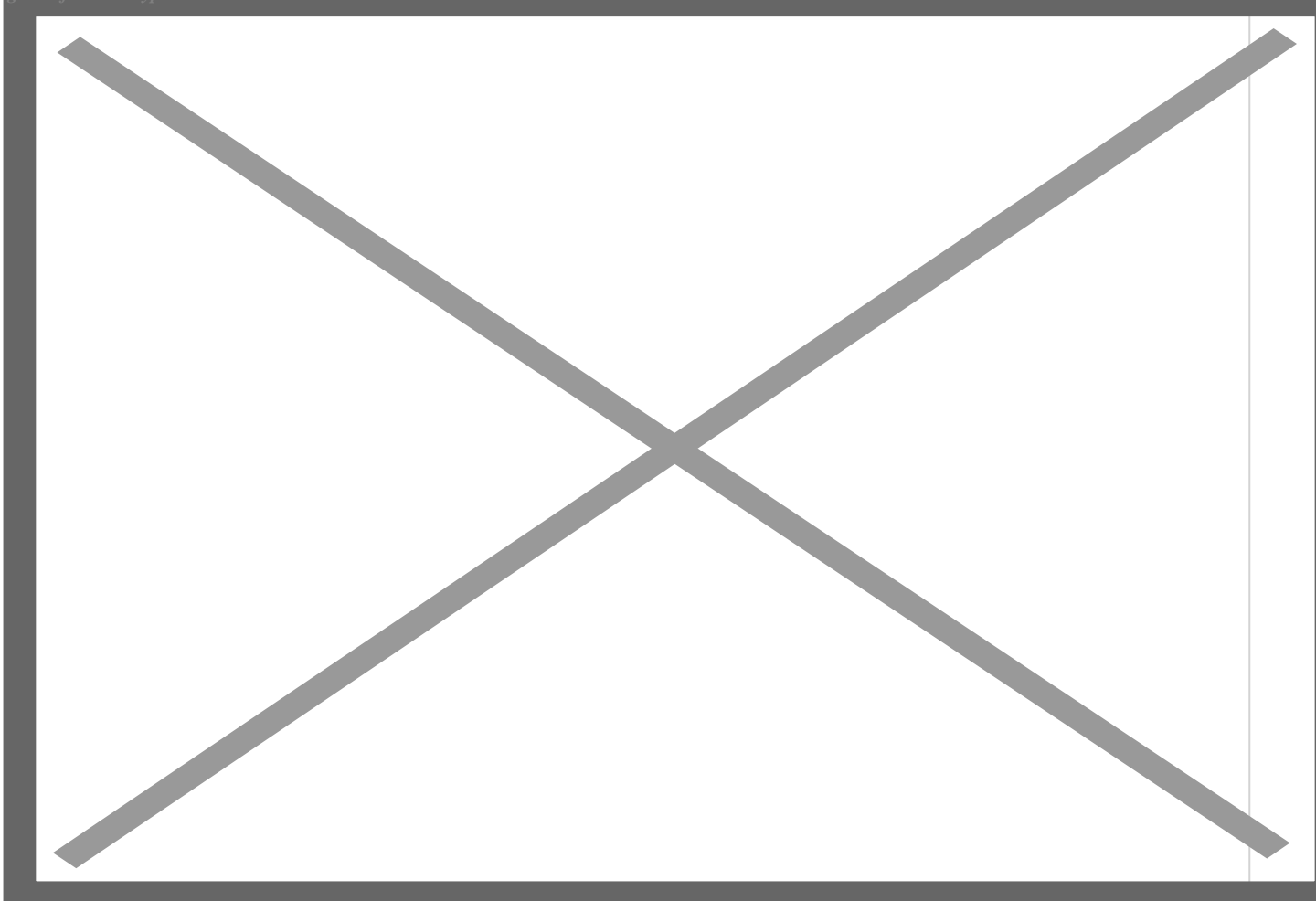


Hospitalization rates double as COVID cases triple across Europe

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WHO says coronavirus cases have tripled across Europe even as authorities scale back on testing [File: Stephane Mahe/Reuters]

Brussels, July 20 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization (WHO) says coronavirus cases have tripled across Europe in the past six weeks, accounting for nearly half of all infections globally.

Super-infectious relatives of the Omicron variant have been driving the new wave of disease across the continent, with repeated infections potentially leading to long COVID. Although intensive care admissions have remained low, the United Nations' health agency said on Tuesday hospitalisation rates had doubled.

"With rising cases, we're also seeing a rise in hospitalisations, which are only set to increase further in the autumn and winter months," Hans Kluge, WHO's Europe director, said in a statement. "This forecast presents a huge challenge to the health workforce in country after country, already under enormous pressure dealing with unrelenting crises since 2020," he added.

The 53 countries in the agency's European region, which stretches to Central Asia, reported nearly three million new coronavirus infections last week, with the virus killing about 3,000 people every week.

Globally, COVID-19 cases have increased for the past five weeks, even as countries scaled back on testing.

Earlier this week, editors of two British medical journals said the country's National Health Service had never before had so many parts of the system so close to collapsing.

Kamran Abbasi of the BMJ and Alastair McLellan of the Health Service Journal wrote in a joint editorial that the UK government was failing to address persistent problems worsened by COVID-19, including ambulances lining up outside hospitals too overloaded to accept new patients.

They lambasted the government's insistence that vaccines have broken the link between infections and hospitalisations, despite evidence pointing to the fact that vaccines dramatically reduce the chances of severe disease and death but do not make a significant dent on transmission.

"The government must stop gaslighting the public and be honest about the threat the pandemic still poses to them and the National Health Service," the editors wrote. In an outline of its COVID-19 fall strategy published on Tuesday, WHO called for a second vaccine booster dose for anyone age five and above with weak immune systems, promoting mask-wearing indoors and on public transport, and better ventilation in schools, offices and other places.

Kluge urged people to make their own decisions, even in countries where authorities have largely abandoned coronavirus restrictions.

"We're all aware of the tools we have to keep ourselves safe, assess our level of risk and take the necessary steps to protect others if we get infected," he said. "Just because a mask isn't mandated doesn't mean it's prohibited."

Earlier this month, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned the coronavirus pandemic was "nowhere near over" and that the new waves around the world indicated that the virus is "running freely."

"As the virus pushes at us, we must push back," Tedros said. "We're in a much better position than at the beginning of the pandemic." However, the effective tools that prevent infections should not be taken for granted, he added.

The WHO's emergency committee on the pandemic has repeatedly stressed the need to reduce transmission of the virus as the trajectory of virus evolution and the characteristics of emerging variants remain "uncertain and unpredictable".



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