

Coronavirus

Get vaccinated: Merkel

COVID deaths higher in Black, Asian Brits

LONDON, Dec 4, (AP): Almost two years into the pandemic, Black people and members of other racial and ethnic minorities in Britain are still dying with the coronavirus at higher rates than white residents, likely because of lower vaccination rates, a government-commissioned report said Friday.

The research found that vaccination has sharply reduced COVID-19 death rates for people of all ethnicities. But Black and South Asian Britons die at higher rates even though white people are more likely to test positive for the virus.

"In the first two waves, the higher death rate seen in ethnic minorities was primarily due to their higher risk of infection compared to whites — particularly in older age groups," said Dr. Raghav Ali, the British government's independent adviser on COVID-19 and ethnicity.



Badenoch

In recent months, Ali said, "we are seeing lower infection rates in ethnic minorities than in white people, but rates of hospital admissions and deaths are still higher, with the pattern now matching levels of vaccine uptake in higher risk groups."

British health officials have launched information campaigns and worked with community groups and religious leaders to combat vaccine hesitancy among ethnic minorities. Ali said they have had some success, with vaccination rates in older Black African and Pakistani people seeing the biggest increase of any group in the six months before October.

But overall vaccination rates remain highest in white people and lowest in Black groups. About 90% of adults in Britain have had at least one vaccine dose, but the figure is under 80% among Asian communities and less than two-thirds among people from Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds.

The government appointed Ali after it became clear that some ethnic groups were being hit harder than others by COVID-19.

Research has highlighted multiple factors. Some ethnic groups have higher prevalence of underlying health conditions and are more likely to live in large, multi-generational households. People from ethnic minorities also hold a big share of frontline jobs, such as taxi and mass transit drivers, that saw high infection rates early in the pandemic.

Transformed

Equalities Minister **Kemi Badenoch** said the "understanding of how COVID-19 affects different ethnic groups has transformed since the pandemic began."

"We know now that factors like the job someone does, where they live, and how many people they live with, impacts how susceptible they are to the virus, and it's imperative that those more at risk get their booster vaccine," she said.

The UK government is aiming to offer everyone 18 and up a third, booster dose of vaccine by the end of January. Health officials hope the increased protection will help keep the new omicron variant at bay, even if it proves more resistant to vaccines than other strains.

Much remains unknown about the variant, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart vaccines.

Britain has confirmed several dozen cases of omicron - including a cluster linked to a concert by pop group Steps in Glasgow - and authorities say the variant is spreading in the community. But the delta variant remains by far the dominant strain.

Britain has recorded more than 145,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe after Russia.

While several other European countries have imposed new restrictions on daily life or introduced vaccine mandates, Britain has held back, though masks are once again mandatory in shops and on public transit.

Amid jitters from businesses that holiday-season trade is at risk from the new variant, the Conservative government urged people to continue to shop and socialize.

"The message to people, I think, is fairly straightforward - which is: keep calm, carry on with your Christmas plan," Conservative Party chief Oliver Dowden said.

Also:

**BERLIN:** Outgoing Chancellor **Angela Merkel** on Saturday made what is likely her final appeal before leaving office next week for Germans to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Merkel gave what is expected to be her last weekly video message two days after federal and state leaders decided on a series of measures meant to break a wave of coronavirus infections.

The measures include excluding unvaccinated people across the country from nonessential stores, restaurants and sports and cultural venues. In a longer-term move, parliament will consider a general vaccine mandate.

At least 68.9% of Germans are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, short of the government's aim of a minimum 75% vaccination rate. The number of unvaccinated residents has been blamed as a key factor in a surge of new virus cases in recent weeks.

Official figures suggest that the infection rate may now be stabilizing, but at too high a level.

The national disease control center on Saturday reported 64,510 new daily cases and a 7-day infection rate of 442.7 new cases per 100,000 residents. Another 378 deaths in 24 hours brought Germany's total in the pandemic to 102,946.

"Every one of them leaves behind families or friends, stunned, speechless and helpless," Merkel said in her video message. "This is so bitter because it is avoidable. With the effective and safe vaccines, we have the key to this in our hands."

She renewed a plea to Germans to take the virus seriously, adding that the new omicron variant "appears to be even more contagious than the previous ones."

"Get vaccinated, no matter whether it's a first vaccination or a booster," Merkel said. "Every vaccination helps."



**MILAN:** A dentist in Italy faces possible criminal charges after trying to receive a coronavirus vaccine in a fake arm made of silicone.

A nurse in the northern city of **Biella**, **Filippa Bua**, said she could tell right away that something was off when a man presented the phony limb for a shot on Thursday.

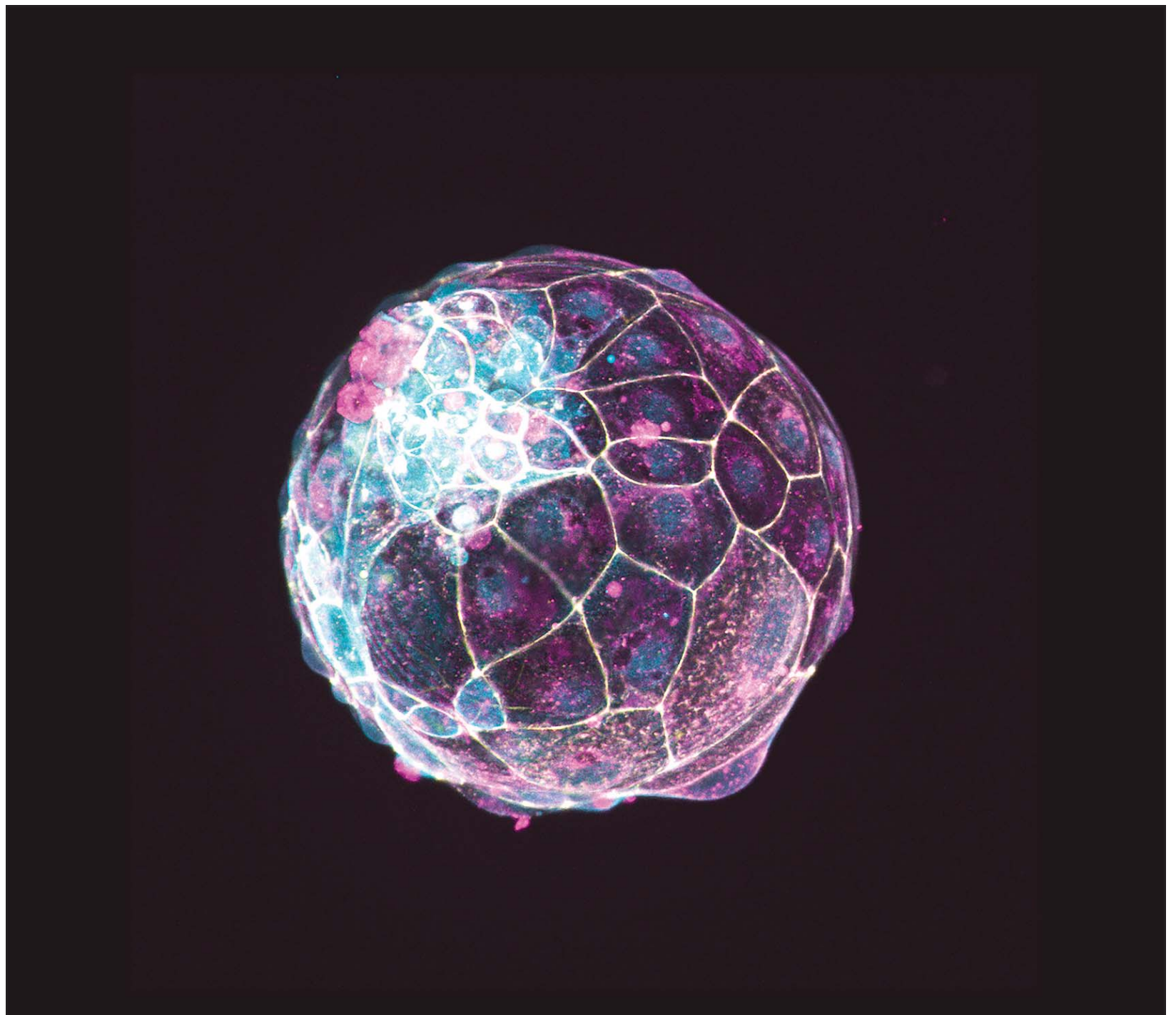
"When I uncovered the arm, I felt skin that was cold and gummy, and the color was too light," Bua told Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

She said she initially thought the 57-year-old man was an amputee and had mistakenly offered the wrong arm. She lifted his shirt and saw a silicone arm.

"I understood immediately that the man was trying to avoid the vaccination by using a silicone prosthetic, into which he hoped that I would inject the drug, unaware, Bua said.

The nurse said the man acknowledged he did not want a vaccine but to obtain a "super" health pass, which from Monday will be required to enter restaurants, cinemas, theaters and other venues in Italy.

He had already been suspended from work because of his refusal to get vaccinated, which Italy requires for medical personnel.



This image, provided by the Institute of Molecular Biology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, shows a human 'blastoid' created in a lab. A new study in *Nature* on Dec. 2, shows how scientists created this structure that mimics a blastocyst, a ball of cells that form within a week of fertilization, and can be used in research. (AP)

Health

An alternative way to study human development

Experts create 'pre-embryos' models

NEW YORK, Dec 4, (AP): Scientists are using human stem cells to create a structure that mimics a pre-embryo and can serve as a research alternative to a real one.

They say these "blastoids" provide an efficient, ethical way to study human development and pursue biomedical discoveries in fertility and contraception.

The latest effort was detailed Thursday in the journal *Nature*. The structures aren't embryos, but scientists nevertheless didn't let them grow past two weeks in deference to longstanding ethical guidelines.

A blastoid is a model for a blastocyst, a ball of cells that form within a week of fertilization and are about the width of a hair. Nicolas Rivron, a researcher at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and one of the authors of the *Nature* paper, said the models are "a fantastic alternative" to human embryos for research, partly because donated embryos are hard to obtain and manipulate in the lab.

"It is extremely difficult to use such human embryos to discover any molecules, genes, principles that might allow us to better understand development and also make biomedical discoveries," Rivron said.

But lab-created stand-ins can be made, altered and studied in big numbers, and would complement embryonic research, he said.

"This unleashes the potential for scientific and biomedical discoveries," he said. For example, what researchers learn studying blastoids could be used to develop contraceptives that don't include hormones.

It's not the first time scientists have created a human blastoid, noted Magdalena Zernicka-Goetz, an expert in stem cell biology at the University of Cambridge who wasn't involved in the latest study. But "every single step is significant," improving efficiency as researchers try to master the model, she said.

To create the blastoids, Rivron and his colleagues used two different types of stem cells: either embryonic stem cells from previously established cell lines or

New data suggests 1 in 44 US children 'affected' by autism

NEW YORK, Dec 4, (AP): New autism numbers released Thursday suggest more US children are being diagnosed with the developmental condition and at younger ages.

In an analysis of 2018 data from nearly a dozen states, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that among 8-year-olds, 1 in 44 had been diagnosed with autism. That rate compares with 1 in 54 identified with autism in 2016.

US autism numbers have been on the rise for several years, but experts believe that reflects more awareness and wider availability of services to treat the condition rather than a true increase in the number of affected children.

A separate CDC report released

Thursday said that children were 50% more likely to be diagnosed with autism by age 4 in 2018 than in 2014.

"There is some progress being made and the earlier kids get identified, the earlier they can access services that they might need to improve their developmental outcome," said CDC researcher and co-author Kelly Shaw.

Geraldine Dawson, director of Duke University's Center for Autism and Brain Development, said the new estimate is similar to one found in research based on screening a large population of children rather than on those already diagnosed. As such, she said it may be closer to reflecting the true state of autism in US children than earlier estimates.



Pharmacist Miriam Maitland draws up vaccines in London, Dec. 1. Britain says it will offer all adults a booster dose of vaccine within two months to bolster the nation's immunity to the new omicron variant of the coronavirus spreads. New measures to combat variant came into force in England on Tuesday, with face coverings again compulsory in shops and on public transport. (AP)



Crosby



Merkel

Discovery

**Seattle sees its wettest fall:** Seattle, a city known for soggy weather, has seen its wettest fall on record.

The National Weather Service says 19.04 inches (48.4 centimeters) of rain fell between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30, breaking a record set in 2006.

A series of wet storms caused by so-called "atmospheric rivers" pounded the Pacific Northwest, causing widespread flooding and damage. Atmospheric rivers are huge plumes of moisture over the Pacific that carry water from oceans onto land.

"It's really been incredible for Seattle. I think what's really been interesting is that we have just had atmospheric river after atmospheric river after atmospheric river, which is something that you usually don't see even in a very wet place like Seattle," said Justin Shaw, who runs the Seattle Weather Blog.

Areas north of Seattle were hit especially hard. The city of Bellingham recorded 23.55 inches (59.8 centimeters) of rain from Sept. 1 to Nov. 30, 6.5 inches (16.5 centimeters) more than the previous high. Officials have said damages from November flooding in Whatcom County, which includes Bellingham, could reach as high as \$50 million.

"We know that climate change makes those kinds of extreme events both more likely to happen and more severe," said **Meade Crosby**, a climate adaptation scientist at the Climate Impact Group of the University of Washington. (AP)



**Astronauts replace antenna:** Spacewalking astronauts replaced a broken antenna outside the International Space Station on Thursday after getting NASA's all-clear for orbiting debris.

US astronauts Tom Marshburn and Kayla Barron were supposed to complete the job Tuesday, but NASA delayed the spacewalk because of potentially threat-

ening space junk. NASA later determined the astronauts were safe to go out, despite a slightly increased risk of a punctured

suit from satellite wreckage. Russia destroyed an old satellite in a missile test nearly three weeks ago, send-



A medical worker wearing protective gear in a booth, takes sample from a man at a temporary screening clinic for the coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Dec. 4. South Korea again broke its daily records for coronavirus infections and deaths and confirmed three more cases of the new omicron variant as officials scramble to tighten social distancing and border controls. (AP)

ing pieces everywhere. NASA isn't saying whether the object of concern was from that event. (AP)



**'Plans fall short of goal':** A research institute's analysis has concluded that the incoming German government's plans for curbing greenhouse gas emissions are insufficient to put Germany on track to meet the goals of the 2015 Paris climate accord.

The German Institute for Economic Research study released Friday was conducted by leading economists and commissioned by 140 civil society organizations, from trade unions to environmental groups and religious organizations.

They found that while the new center-left government's proposals for reducing greenhouse gases are the country's most ambitious yet, they fall short in all sectors.

A three-party coalition government of the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Free Democrats is expected to take office next week, with Chancellor **Angela Merkel** stepping down after 16 years.

Claudia Kemfert, one of the authors of the study, said the plans unveiled so far showed a "clear improvement on previous policies," including by setting a target of meeting 80% of Germany's electricity needs from renewable sources by 2030 and making it possible to end coal use by that date. (AP)