

Coronavirus

New virus surge feared

UK counts on shots and common sense

LONDON, Sept 26, (AP) — Britons are encouraged these days — though in most cases not required — to wear face coverings in crowded indoor spaces. But Prime Minister Boris Johnson regularly appears in the packed, poorly ventilated House of Commons cheek-by-jowl with other mask-less Conservative lawmakers.

For critics, that image encapsulates the flaw in the government's strategy, which has abandoned most pandemic restrictions and is banking on voluntary restraint and a high vaccination rate to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

As winter approaches, bringing the threat of a new COVID-19 surge, Britain's light touch is setting it apart from more cautious nations.

"The story of this government in the pandemic is too little, too late," said Layla Moran, an opposition Liberal Democrat lawmaker who heads the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coronavirus.

She said some UK hospitals are already seeing the number of virus patients in intensive care units that they would normally expect in the depths of winter, though overall daily hospital admissions are running at about a fifth of January's peak.

And while cases soared when restrictions were lifted this summer, deaths didn't follow at anywhere near the same pace. But the winter months, when respiratory diseases are usually at their highest, could bring an added challenge.

"Unless the government starts to do something differently, I don't think we're going to be able to avert the worst this winter," Moran said.

The government argues that its plan is working so far — and it can change course if needed.

Britain has recorded more than 135,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe after Russia and about the same number per capita as the United States. Yet it also has organized a successful inoculation campaign that has seen 65% of the whole population fully vaccinated.

Restrictions

That relatively high rate led Johnson's government to decide in July that it was safe to scrap restrictions on business activity and daily life: no more social distancing, limits on gatherings or masks required anywhere in England. Businesses can impose their own measures, but otherwise Johnson has encouraged people to "be sensible."

In contrast to many other European nations — even some with higher inoculation rates than the UK — proof of vaccination is not required in England to eat in restaurants, attend mass events or enter crowded venues such as nightclubs. Scotland, which is part of the UK but sets its own health rules, is being more cautious, introducing vaccine passports for nightclubs and keeping mandatory masks indoors.

Pupils and teachers in England's schools don't have to wear face coverings, despite the objections of unions and public health officials — a contrast to European countries including France, Italy and Spain that have kept mask requirements for schools.

While the US has made vaccinations compulsory for millions of workers, Johnson's government requires proof of inoculation only for nursing home staff, and is considering it for health care workers.

Once the UK had some of Europe's strictest international travel rules, but it's easing quarantine and testing restrictions for many visitors starting next month.

The UK has often gone its own way during the pandemic. Health authorities gambled on a gap of two to three months between doses, rather than the three to four weeks recommended by vaccine makers, in order to speed the rollout. That paid off, with studies since suggesting the longer gap is at least as effective, and possibly more so.

Britain diverged from its peers again on the question of vaccinating kids. When the US, Canada and much of the European Union extended inoculations to children between 12 and 15, the UK held off, saying the health benefit to kids was marginal. Then Britain decided to vaccinate that age group after all — but initially with a single dose, rather than the usual two.

Britain has also gone further than most nations in giving vaccine booster shots, offering a third dose to everyone over 50. That puts it at odds with the World Health Organization, which has strongly objected to rich nations giving a third round of shots when poor countries don't have enough vaccines for their first. In the US, authorities endorsed booster shots for millions of older or otherwise vulnerable Americans.

Johnson's government is counting on vaccines to do the heavy lifting against the virus, supplemented by voluntary "common sense" behavior.

But after an exceptionally long and strict lockdown earlier this year, it's not clear Britons will freely choose any virus-prevention measures they're not forced to take. When restrictions were initially lifted, just under two-thirds of people said they planned to keep wearing masks in shops and on public transport. Now the number of people wearing coverings has declined sharply on the London Underground, which requires but barely enforces mask use.

Experience

Critics say the government has failed to learn from experience and seems to be fueled by optimism rather than evidence.

Stephen Reicher, a University of St. Andrews psychology professor who helps advise the government, recalled that a year ago, Johnson's team was slow to act when scientific advisers recommended a short "circuit-breaker" lockdown to curb fast-rising coronavirus cases.

"As always happens if you wait and things get out of control, you have to impose greater restrictions, which is why we had a non-Christmas and such an awful winter and spring" spent in lockdown, he told Sky News.

Moran, the opposition lawmaker, and other critics argue that moderate measures, such as better ventilation in schools and masks indoors, could avert the need for stringent restrictions this winter.

But the government notes that scientists' most pessimistic predictions, which said cases could rise to 100,000 a day by the time schools reopened in September, haven't come true.

The UK is now averaging about 140 deaths daily — just over one-tenth of what it saw at the peak — and 30,000 new infections a day.

Johnson said restrictions such as mandatory masks and work-from-home orders could be reimposed if hospitalizations surge. But he hoped it wouldn't be needed.

"The result of this vaccination campaign is that we have one of the most free societies and one of the most open economies in Europe," he said. "And that's why we are now sticking with our strategy."

Standing beside him at a news conference, Chief Scientific Adviser Patrick Vallance applied the brakes. He said the lesson of the pandemic was that "when you make a move, you have to go earlier than you think you want to, you need to go harder than you think you want to."

"So if this goes in the wrong direction ... it's important that the measures are put in place early enough and they're significant enough," he said.



Johnson



In this Aug. 8, 2021, file photo, a patient receives a Pfizer vaccine shot at a pop-up COVID-19 vaccination center, set up at Heaven night club in London. Britain's Conservative government is hoping a combination of relatively high vaccination rates and common-sense behavior will keep a lid on coronavirus infections this fall and winter and avoid the need for restrictive measures. That plan employs a lighter touch than most nations. (AP)

Coronavirus

Millions remain unprotected

US starts COVID booster shots

COVID vaccine boosters could mean billions for drugmakers

NEW YORK, Sept 26, (AP) — The US launched a campaign to offer boosters of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine to millions of Americans on Friday even as federal health officials stressed the real problem remains getting first shots to the unvaccinated.

"We will not boost our way out of this pandemic," warned Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — even though she took the rare step of overruling the advice of her own expert panel to make more people eligible for the booster.

The vast majority of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are among the unvaccinated, Walensky noted. And all three COVID-19 vaccines in the US offer strong protection against severe illness, hospitalization and death despite the extra-contagious delta variant that caused cases to soar. But immunity against milder infection appears to wane months after initial vaccination.

People anxious for another Pfizer dose lost no time rolling up their sleeves after Walensky ruled late Thursday on who's eligible: Americans 65 and older and others vulnerable because of underlying health problems or where they work and live — once they're six months past their last dose.

Confusion

Jen Peck, 52, of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, qualified because of her job as an education math and science consultant. She was vaccinated back in March but worries about unknowingly picking up and spreading an infection. She travels between rural schools where many students and teachers don't wear masks and the younger children can't yet be vaccinated.

"I don't want to be COVID Mary carrying it around to buildings full of unvaccinated kiddos. I could not live with myself if I carried it from one building to another. That haunts me, the thought of that," said Peck, who got the extra shot first thing Friday morning.

Health officials must clear up confusion over who should get a booster, and why. For now, the booster campaign is what Walensky called "a first step." It only applies to people originally vaccinated with shots made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech. Decisions on boosters for Americans who received Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccines are still to come.

President Joe Biden said if you're vaccinated, "You're in good shape and we're doing everything we can to keep it that way, which is where the booster comes in." He urged those now eligible for an extra shot to "go get the booster," saying he'd get his own soon — and that everyone should be patient and wait their turn.

Exactly who should get a booster was a contentious decision as CDC advisers spent two days poring over the evidence. Walensky endorsed most of their choices: People 65 and older, nursing home residents and those ages 50 to 64 who have chronic health problems such as diabetes should be offered one once they're six months past their last Pfizer dose. Those 18 and older with health problems can decide

for themselves if they want a booster. But in an extremely unusual move, Walensky overruled her advisers' objections and decided an additional broad swath of the population also qualifies: People at increased risk of infection — not serious illness — because of their jobs or their living conditions. That includes health care workers, teachers and people in jails or homeless shelters.

"This was scientific close call," Walensky said Friday. "In that situation it was my call to make." Experts say it was only the second time since 2000 that a CDC director overruled its advisory panel.

Health care workers can't come to work if they have even a mild infection and hospitals worried about staffing shortages welcomed that decision. But some of the CDC's advisers worry that offering boosters so broadly could backfire without better evidence that it really will make a difference beyond the most medically vulnerable.

"My hope is that all of this confusion — or what may feel like confusion — doesn't send a message to the public

that there is any problem with the vaccine," said Dr. Beth Bell, a University of Washington expert. "I want to make sure people understand these are fantastic vaccines and they work extremely well."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the US government's top infectious disease specialist, cautioned against seeking a Pfizer booster before the recommended six-month mark.

"You get much more of a bang out of the shot" by letting the immune system mature that long so it's prepared to rev up production of virus-fighting antibodies, he explained.

The US had already authorized third doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines for certain people with weakened immune systems, such as cancer patients and transplant recipients. Other Americans, healthy or not, have managed to get boosters, in some cases simply by asking.

About 182 million Americans are fully vaccinated, or just 55% of the total population. Three-quarters of those 12 and older — the ages eligible for vaccination — have had a first dose.

Those companies also may gain business from people who get other vaccines initially. In Britain, which plans to offer boosters to everyone over 50 and other vulnerable people, an expert panel has recommended that Pfizer's shot be the primary choice, with Moderna as the alternative.

Andersen expects Moderna, which has no other products on the market, to generate a roughly \$13 billion profit next year from all COVID-19 vaccine sales if boosters are broadly authorized.

Potential vaccine profits are harder to estimate for Pfizer, but company executives have said they expect their pre-tax adjusted profit margin from the vaccine to be in the "high 20s" as a percentage of revenue. That would translate to a profit of around \$7 billion next year just from boosters, based on Andersen's sales prediction.

J&J and Europe's AstraZeneca have said they don't intend to profit from their COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic.

For Pfizer and Moderna, the boosters could be more profitable than the original doses because they won't come with the research and development costs the companies incurred to get the vaccines on the market in the first place.

WBB Securities CEO Steve Brozak said the booster shots will represent "almost pure profit" compared with the initial doses.



In this Jan. 22, 2021, file photo, a certified medical assistant prepares doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. With more than 40 million doses of coronavirus vaccines available, US health authorities said they're confident both seniors and other vulnerable Americans seeking booster shots and parents anticipating approval of initial shots for young children will have easy access. (AP)

Discovery

'Preserve human cultural heritage': The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) on Saturday reiterated the call for pooling efforts to preserve the human cultural heritage.

In a statement marking the Islamic World Heritage Day, the organization warns against dangers of degeneration or destruction of the cultural heritage.

For the second year, the ICESCO is celebrating the Islamic World Heritage Day, an occasion it hopes to become an annual celebration of peoples' memories and a call to pay due attention to human heritage in general, according to the statement.

The occasion came to existence following the proposal that ICESCO submitted to the 11th Conference of Culture Ministers in the Islamic World, held in Tunis, on Dec 17, 2019, to proclaim Dec 25 as the Islamic World Heritage Day.

This day is an opportunity to highlight the abundance and diversity of cultural heritage in the countries of the Islamic World and underline the serious efforts exerted to preserve, safeguard, and promote this heritage.

ICESCO reiterates the great interest it accords to preserving human cultural heritage, raising awareness of its significance and roles, and warning against the dangers of its destruction, especially during conflicts. (AP)

Thunberg joins climate rally: Tens of thousands of environmental activists staged a rally outside Germany's parliament to demand that politicians take stronger action to curb climate change.

The protest outside the Reichstag in Berlin was part of a string of rallies around the world, from Japan, Indian and Nigeria to Greece, Italy and Britain — amid dire warnings that the planet faces dangerous temperature rises unless greenhouse gas emissions are cut sharply in coming years. Across Germany alone, hundreds of thousands of marchers joined similar protests in several cities and towns.

The idea for a global "climate strike" was inspired by teenage Swedish activist Greta Thunberg's solo protest in Stockholm three years ago. It snowballed into a mass movement until the coronavirus pandemic put a stop to large gatherings. Activists have only recently started staging smaller protests again.

Thunberg and prominent German climate activist Luisa Neubauer accused politicians of falling short, saying the programs of the main parties weren't far-reaching enough to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) — the more ambitious limit in the 2015 Paris climate accord. (AP)

Oldest human footprints found: Fossilized footprints discovered in New Mexico indicate that early humans were walking across North America around

23,000 years ago, researchers reported. The first footprints were found in a dry lake bed in White Sands National Park in 2009. Scientists at the US Geological Survey recently analyzed seeds stuck in the footprints to determine their approximate age, ranging from around 22,800 and 21,130 years ago.

The findings may shed light on a mystery that has long intrigued scientists: When did people first arrive in the



Neubauer



Thunberg

Americas, after dispersing from Africa and Asia?

Most scientists believe ancient migration came by way of a now-submerged land bridge that connected Asia to Alaska. Based on various evidence — including stone tools, fossil bones and genetic analysis — other researchers have offered a range of possible dates for human arrival in the Americas, from 13,000 to 26,000 years ago or more. (AP)