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Covid: New Plan B rules on working from home and masks announced for England

🕒 8 December 2021

Coronavirus



By Francesca Gillett & Dulcie Lee

BBC News

People in England are being asked to work from home again if possible and face masks will be compulsory in most public places, as part of new rules to limit the spread of Omicron.

Covid passes will also be needed to get into nightclubs and large venues from next week.

Boris Johnson **announced the government was moving to its back-up plan** of extra Covid rules at a news conference.

"It's not a lockdown, it's Plan B," the prime minister said.

He said moving to the tougher measures was the "proportionate and responsible" thing to do.

Mr Johnson said more is still being learned about new variant Omicron and the picture might get better, but that it "could lead to a big rise in hospitalisations and therefore sadly in deaths".

He said the new variant was "growing much faster" than Delta and early analysis suggested cases could be doubling every 2.5 to three days.

Under the new rules:

From Friday, face masks will be required in more public settings - including theatres and cinemas

From Monday, people will be asked to work from home where possible

From Wednesday, the NHS Covid Pass will also be required for visitors to nightclubs, indoor unseated venues with more than 500 people, unseated outdoor venues with more than 4,000 people and any event with more than 10,000 people

The NHS Covid Pass **crashed hours after the PM's announcement**, with users unable to download their domestic or travel passes. NHS Digital said it was investigating the issue as a priority.

Mr Johnson said Christmas parties and nativity plays should still go ahead - as long as the guidance is followed.

"The best way to ensure we all have a Christmas as close to normal as possible is to get on with Plan B," he said. "Irritating though it may be, it is not a lockdown."

Ministers have repeatedly said there are no plans for another lockdown in England.

How big a threat is Omicron?

What are the Plan B rules?

What's the new working from home guidance?

Where will I need a Covid passport and how do I get one?

Many of the questions the PM faced centred on the row over the Downing Street Christmas party at the height of lockdown rules last December.

Government adviser Allegra Stratton - who was seen with other No 10 staff joking about the party in a leaked video from last year - resigned just before the news conference, saying she would always regret her remarks.

Earlier Mr Johnson apologised in the Commons for this video, although he said that he had been repeatedly told there had been no party. The Metropolitan Police has now said they will not investigate the issue, due to lack of evidence.

The prime minister denied that the Plan B announcement was timed to divert attention from the Christmas party, saying the government did not want to delay bringing in the rules designed to protect public health.



| Laura Kuenssberg challenges PM over new restrictions

There are currently 568 confirmed cases of Omicron in the UK, **figures show** - although the UK Health Security Agency estimates that the true number of infections is about 20 times higher and probably closer to 10,000.

Other nations of the UK - which are in charge of their own Covid rules - have already brought in stricter restrictions similar to Plan B.

People in Wales and Scotland have already been told to work from home where possible and Northern Ireland **recently strengthened its advice.**

Covid passes are also currently required for venues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In England, people will be exempt from showing their Covid passport when attending religious worship, weddings and funerals.

Working from home: 'It will be painful to go into reverse gear again'

Covid passports 'devastating' for nightclubs

How worried should we be about Omicron?

What are England's mask rules now?

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon urged people to follow the rules, adding: "Even if you feel angry with a politician just now, please remember just how important compliance is for the health and safety of you, your loved ones and the country."

Sir Patrick Vallance - the government's chief scientific adviser - also urged people to comply. "It only works if we all do it," he said.



Analysis
By Nick Trigg
Health correspondent

The measures introduced are not about stopping the spread of Omicron, or even reducing the number of cases.

Instead, it is about slowing the spread. The big concern is a huge surge of cases that leads to a wave of hospital admissions that could overwhelm the NHS.

There are suggestions Omicron is leading to milder illness. There is logic in that as reinfections, or infections after vaccination, are less likely to lead to serious illness.

But if infections rise quickly enough there is still the risk of hospital cases rising. A variant that causes half the amount of serious illness will lead to more people ending up in hospital if infection rates more than double.

So the hope is that these measures will flatten and delay the peak. That will allow more boosters to go into arms - and the evidence that is emerging on

vaccine effectiveness against the new variant suggests that will make an important difference to the spread of the virus.

There will be a debate and vote in the House of Commons next week on the new rules, said Health Secretary Sajid Javid, who made a statement to MPs at the same time as Mr Johnson's news conference.

After Mr Javid's statement, several Conservative MPs expressed their dismay at the introduction of tougher restrictions. Tory MP Dr Liam Fox said: "We cannot allow permanent threats of overloading the NHS as a means to maintain semi-permanent restrictions on our people."

The health secretary also said vaccine manufacturers may have new vaccines ready to trial "within weeks" to combat Omicron. However, existing vaccines should still protect people against severe illness from Omicron, the World Health Organization said.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer welcomed the tougher measures, adding: "I hope the prime minister takes his own guidance this time."



Analysis
By Iain Watson
Political correspondent

Armed with a hastily arranged inquiry and the resignation of his former spokesperson Allegra Stratton, the prime minister could demonstrate at his press conference that that he wasn't hiding from questions on the Downing Street party of last year.

There were caveats to his "guidance was followed" mantra - such as "as far as I am aware" - and he was pushed to broaden the remit of the cabinet secretary's inquiry.

But in replying to Laura Kuenssberg's question on trust, he emphasised his trust in the British people rather than fully addressing whether they could trust him.

As many of the Plan B measures won't be introduced until next week, questions will inevitably be asked about whether the public health message would have landed with more impact had the press conference been held on a different day.

His critics - and that includes some Conservatives - say he was indulging in a "dead cat" strategy to divert attention from whatever had been going on behind the black door of Downing Street.

But it seemed at this press conference that the cat was still alive and prowling around the prime minister.

[Read more on the Allegra Stratton story here.](#)

Scientists believe the variant could spread more easily than Delta, and could out-compete it to become the dominant variant in the UK.

But much is still unknown, and it could still take weeks to understand how severe illness from the variant is and what it means for the effectiveness of vaccines.



Watch members of the public react to the leaked video of No 10 staff joking about holding a Christmas party

Last week, the government changed the rules in England so that all contacts of suspected Omicron cases have to self-isolate for 10 days, even if they are fully vaccinated.

On Wednesday, another 51,342 confirmed cases of Covid were recorded and a further 161 deaths reported within 28 days of a positive test.

Plan B measures for England

New restrictions being introduced to deal with Omicron



From Friday 10 Dec

Face masks compulsory in most public venues, including theatres and cinemas



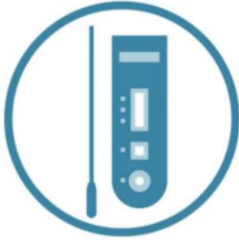
From Monday 13 Dec

Guidance to work from home reintroduced



From next week

NHS Covid pass mandatory for entry into nightclubs and venues



Self-isolation to be replaced by daily testing for contacts of Covid-positive people

Source: UK government

BBC

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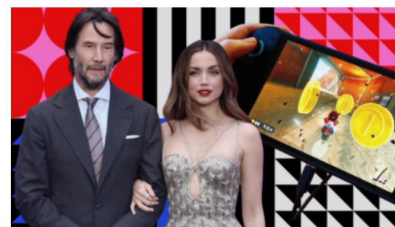
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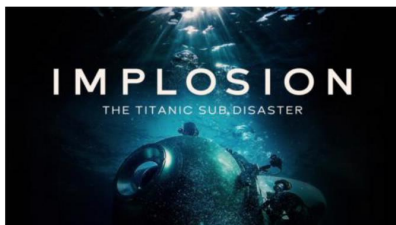
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