

Connecting Communities for COVID19 News

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Isolation Tips

Slovak health minister proposes extending lockdown till Dec 16

Slovakia's health minister said on Monday he would ask the cabinet to extend a lockdown aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19 infections by one week until Dec. 16. Slovakia, a country of 5.5 million, has grappled with one of the world's worst coronavirus waves in the past few weeks and introduced a lockdown that shut most shops and services on Nov. 25. Under the lockdown, Slovaks are allowed to school and work but non-essential movement between districts is banned, as well as most public gatherings and events. Non-essential shops are closed.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovak-health-minister-proposes-extending-lockdown-till-dec-16-2021-12-06/>

Hygiene Helpers

South Africa's Biovac to start making Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in early 2022 - exec

South Africa's Biovac Institute will start making Pfizer-BioNTech's, COVID-19 vaccine early next year after receiving the drug substance from Europe, a Pfizer executive said on Monday. Biovac's "fill and finish" deal with Pfizer, announced in July, will make it one of the few companies processing COVID-19 shots in Africa, where many countries have struggled to access sufficient doses during the pandemic. "We expect that the Cape Town facility will be incorporated into our supply chain by the end of this year," Patrick van der Loo, Pfizer regional president for Africa and the Middle East, told a conference in Kigali on vaccine manufacturing in Africa.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/south-africas-biovac-start-making-pfizer-biontech-covid-19-vaccine-early-2022-2021-12-06/>

Italy tightens curbs on unvaccinated as COVID-19 cases rise

Italy tightened curbs on Monday on people still not vaccinated against COVID-19, limiting their access to an array of places and services. The measures were announced last month, even before the discovery of the Omicron variant, and come as cases of coronavirus are starting to tick up across the country, albeit at a slower rate than in many other European nations. Under the new rules, only people who have been vaccinated or have recently recovered from COVID-19 can access indoor seating at bars and restaurants, visit museums, go to cinemas and clubs and attend sporting events.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italy-tightens-curbs-unvaccinated-covid-19-cases-rise-2021-12-06/>

Covid-19 news: Australia plans to vaccinate five to 11-year-olds

Five to 11-year-olds in Australia could get a coronavirus vaccine as early as 10 January, following provisional approval by the nation's drugs regulator. A one-third dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was approved as safe and effective for this age group by the Therapeutic Goods Administration. The rollout is subject to approval by the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation. Like adults, the 2.3 million eligible children will receive two doses of the vaccine at least three weeks apart. In the UK, covid-19 vaccinations are only available for those aged 12 and over. But the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is currently adjudicating on whether under-12s should also get jabbed. The US and Israel began offering the vaccine to 5 to 11-year-olds last month

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2237475-covid-19-news-australia-plans-to-vaccinate-five-to-11-year-olds/>

New York mayor plans vaccination mandate for private-sector employers

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Monday he planned to issue a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for private-sector employers that will go into effect on Dec. 27, calling it a "pre-emptive strike." Several indicators on Monday showed the spread of COVID-19 were increasing in the most populous city in the United States, including the percentage of people who are testing positive for the virus, according to data from New York City.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/new-york-mayor-issue-private-sector-employer-covid-19-vaccination-mandate-msnbc-2021-12-06/>

Germany plans to make vaccination compulsory for some jobs

The incoming German government wants to make COVID-19 vaccinations mandatory from March 16 for people working in hospitals, nursing homes and other medical practices, according to a copy of draft legislation seen by Reuters on Sunday. Germany has been reticent about making vaccines compulsory for fear of exacerbating a shortage of medical and nursing home staff, but support has grown for the idea as the country has faced surging infections in a fourth wave of the pandemic. The Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats, which are set to form the new German government on Wednesday, are set to present the legislation to parliament in the coming week.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-plans-make-vaccination-compulsory-some-jobs-draft-2021-12-05/>

Community Activities

Some Covid-19 policies fuel violence against women and girls

The emergence of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 with its many mutations has rightly sparked global concern. Another Covid-related issue that should also spark concern, but continues to fly under the radar, is the endemic violence directed toward women and girls around the world that has been heightened by responses to the pandemic. On a recent visit to a tribal village in South India, I met with children, elders, and teachers, who told me how their lives have been affected by Covid-19. The implementation of crucial, but often blunt, public health measures such as stay-at-home policies and the disruption of key services like schools and health facilities have significantly eroded social well-being, isolation, income, and educational attainment. They have also increased violence against many women and girls.

<https://www.statnews.com/2021/12/06/covid-19-policies-fuel-violence-against-women-girls/>

Canadian employers, facing labor shortage, accommodate the unvaccinated

Canada's tight labor market is forcing many companies to offer regular COVID-19 testing over vaccine mandates, while others are reversing previously announced inoculation requirements even as Omicron variant cases rise. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government adopted one of the strictest inoculation policies in the world for civil servants and has already put more than 1,000 workers on unpaid leave, with thousands more at risk.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/canadian-employers-facing-labor-shortage-accommodate-unvaccinated-2021-12-05/>

Anti-lockdown protesters hit with water cannons and tear gas in Belgium

Belgium became the latest European country to see disorder linked to reimposed Covid-19 restrictions on Sunday. Police deployed water cannon and tear gas to disperse protesters in Brussels rallying against new measures designed to slow the winter wave. The government announced new rules for the third Friday in a row last week in a bid to dampen infections and take pressure off the struggling health system. Thousands chanted 'freedom, freedom' while others carried anti-vax placards as the crowd headed towards the headquarters of the European Union.

<https://metro.co.uk/2021/12/06/belgium-anti-lockdown-protesters-hit-with-water-cannons-and-tear-gas-15723986/>

Working Remotely

Scottish employers failing to support remote management

The majority of Scottish employers are failing to support line managers in the skills of supervising remote workers, even though more than eight in 10 believe staff are more likely to work flexible hours as a result of the pandemic. A snap poll of more than 100 Scottish businesses leaders and senior managers by Flexibility Works found that nearly two years after the first lockdown restrictions were imposed, just 31% of organisations had introduced any additional support or training for those managing remote workers. Almost two-thirds - 61% - have offered nothing at all.

https://www.heraldscotland.com/business_hq/19758541.scottish-employers-failing-support-remote-management/

Ford delays return-to-work hybrid plan to March amid COVID uncertainty

Ford Motor said on Monday it would push its return-to-work hybrid plan to March as the state of the COVID-19 pandemic remained uncertain. The No. 2 U.S. automaker said it will begin a pilot phase for select employees in February and March. The company had previously said it would not return to work under a hybrid work model - a combination of on-site and remote working - before January. Ford had required most of its U.S. salaried employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19 by Jan. 4.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/ford-shifts-return-work-hybrid-model-march-covid-situation-re-mains-fluid-2021-12-06/>

Virtual Classrooms

New Covid variant extends online learning period

The arrival of the fourth wave of Covid-19 via the latest Omicron variant has put online learning higher on the agenda, with another new option for South African parents to consider for their children in 2022.

<https://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/news/new-covid-variant-extends-online-learning-period-7e1fb605-206f-4920-bb20-a9ffa3ffebe3>

Education ministry holds virtual symposium for open, distance and e-learning

In Indonesia, the Education, Culture, Research and Technology Ministry held the 2021 International Open, Distance and e-Learning Symposium (ISODEL) from Dec. 1 to 3. The theme of this year's symposium was "Education technology in the new normal: Now and beyond". As the title states, ISODEL's 2021 focus was highlighting technological innovations to support schools across the country engaging in remote education during Covid-19.

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/adv/2021/12/06/education-ministry-holds-virtual-symposium-for-open-distance-and-e-learning.html>

Public Policies

France can avoid return to lockdown and still save Christmas -PM

France will close nightclubs ahead of Christmas and tighten social distancing measures in response to the emergent Omicron variant of the coronavirus but there is no need for new lockdowns or curfews, Prime Minister Jean Castex said on Monday. Castex said a fifth wave of the pandemic was now surging through the country. But he said that with 52 million people now vaccinated - nearly 90% of those eligible - the situation is better than in previous outbreaks and there is no need for drastic measures to save Christmas.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-close-discos-four-weeks-ahead-year-end-2021-12-06/>

Canada enters deals to procure Merck and Pfizer's Covid-19 antiviral pills

The Government of Canada has entered agreements with Merck and Pfizer to procure courses of their Covid-19 oral antiviral pills. According to the agreement with Merck (MSD), Canada will obtain 500,000 courses of the company's oral antiviral, molnupiravir, on obtaining authorisation from Health Canada. The government also holds options to procure up to 500,000 additional courses of the pill. In June, Merck entered a deal valued at about \$1.2bn with the US Government to supply

molnupiravir.

<https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/news/canada-deals-merck-pfizer-antiviral/>

Argentina approves Sputnik Light Covid-19 shot as standalone and booster

The Ministry of Health of Argentina has granted approval for Russia's single-dose Sputnik Light vaccine as a standalone and a booster vaccine for Covid-19. This vaccine is based on human adenovirus serotype 26, which is also used in Russia's Sputnik V vaccine as the first component, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said. According to data from 28,000 participants in Moscow, Russia, Sputnik Light given as standalone demonstrated an efficacy of 70% against Covid-19 infection from the Delta variant during the initial three months following inoculation. The shot was found to have an effectiveness of 75% in people aged below 60 years.

<https://www.pharmaceutical-technology.com/news/argentina-approves-sputnik-light/>

COVID-19 vaccines: Antibody levels might help speed up approval

Health authorities only approve the use of COVID-19 vaccines that have gone through rigorous clinical trials. Scientists assess whether a vaccine is effective by checking whether participants in a trial develop the infection after having the vaccine. In the present study, researchers find that a person's antibody response could serve as a correlate of effectiveness, instead of whether people develop the infection. Using this proposed measure could speed up the regulatory approval of future vaccines.

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/covid-19-vaccines-do-antibody-levels-indicate-effectiveness>

Maintaining Services

Nearly 70 ICU medics at Spanish hospital COVID-19 positive after Christmas party

Nearly 70 nurses and doctors working in the intensive care unit at a Spanish hospital have tested positive for COVID-19 after attending a Christmas party, health authorities said on Monday. Sixty-eight medics at the University Regional Hospital in Malaga had been diagnosed with the coronavirus, the Andalusian regional government said. Health authorities said they were investigating the source of the infection but added all 68 attended a Christmas party on Dec. 1 at which 173 people were present.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/nearly-70-icu-medics-spanish-hospital-covid-19-positive-after-christmas-party-2021-12-06/>

Suspected Omicron case aboard Norwegian cruise ship is South African crew member

A South African crew member suspected of having the Omicron variant of COVID-19 is among the 17 cases of the virus detected on a cruise ship that disembarked in New Orleans over the weekend, the cruise line said on Monday. U.S. officials are closely monitoring the latest variant, which has been detected in at least a third of states, to try to ascertain its severity amid a rise in COVID-19 cases in recent weeks.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/least-17-covid-cases-found-aboard-cruise-ship-new-orleans-2021-12-06/>

South Africa readies hospitals as Omicron variant drives new COVID-19 wave

South Africa is preparing its hospitals for more admissions, as the Omicron coronavirus variant pushes the country into a fourth wave of COVID-19 cases, President Cyril Ramaphosa said on Monday. Omicron was first detected in southern Africa last month and has triggered global alarm as governments fear another surge in infections. South Africa's daily infections surged last week to more than 16,000 on Friday from roughly 2,300 on Monday.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-readies-hospitals-omicron-variant-drives-new-covid-19-wave-2021-12-06/>

England has community transmission of Omicron variant, health minister says

Britain's health minister said on Monday there is now community transmission of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus across regions of England but it is too early to say if this will "knock us off our road to recovery". Defending the introduction of stricter rules to slow the spread of the virus, Sajid Javid told parliament the government was "leaving nothing to chance" while scientists assessed the variant, which was first reported in South Africa last month. Javid said there are now 261 Omicron cases in England, 71 in Scotland and four in Wales - a total of 336.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/england-has-community-transmission-omicron-variant-health-minister-says-2021-12-06/>

Healthcare Innovations

Novartis working on pan-coronavirus oral treatment, CEO says

Novartis hopes to still play a role in the development of COVID-19 treatments with research ongoing for a pill that could work broadly against coronaviruses, not just the one that causes COVID-19, chief executive Vas Narasimhan told Reuters. In an interview following his recent presentation at Total Health last week, the head of the Swiss drugmaker pointed to Novartis' manufacturing support to COVID-19 vaccine and drug makers when asked if it had been on the sidelines during the pandemic. "Now I would have loved for some of our own clinical trials to have worked out, but they didn't. I mean, that's part of the deal," Narasimhan said.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/novartis-working-pan-coronavirus-oral-treatment-ceo-says-2021-12-06/>

Mixing Pfizer, AstraZ COVID-19 shots with Moderna gives better immune response -UK study

A major British study into mixing COVID-19 vaccines has found that people had a better immune response when they received a first dose of AstraZeneca or Pfizer-BioNTech shots followed by Moderna nine weeks later, according to the results on Monday. "We found a really good immune response across the board..., in fact, higher than the threshold set by Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine two doses," Matthew Snape, the Oxford professor behind the trial dubbed Com-COV2, told Reuters. The findings supporting flexible dosing will offer some hope to poor and middle income countries which may need to combine different brands between first and second shots if supplies run low or become unstable.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/mixing-pfizer-astraz-covid-19-shots-with-moderna-gives-better-immune-response-uk-2021-12-06/>

Omicron may raise re-infection risk; booster protection documented

A summary of some recent studies on COVID-19. They include research that warrants further study to corroborate the findings and that has yet to be certified by peer review. Re-infection risk may be higher with Omicron variant. Survivors of previous infection with the virus that causes COVID-19, known as SARS-CoV-2, may be at higher risk for re-infection with the Omicron variant than with earlier versions of the virus, according to preliminary findings.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-may-raise-re-infection-risk-booster-protection-documented-2021-12-06/>

Early data from South Africa hints Omicron variant may cause less severe Covid, but more research is needed

As the world waits for studies that give a clear picture of the Omicron variant, early clinical data emerging from South Africa hint at a virus that may cause less severe cases of Covid-19. The South African Medical Research Council posted a report Saturday of the early experiences at several hospitals in Gauteng Province, where Omicron was first spotted in the country. Strikingly, most hospitalized patients who tested positive for Covid did not need supplemental oxygen. Few developed Covid pneumonia, few required high-level care, and fewer still were admitted to intensive

care.

<https://www.statnews.com/2021/12/04/omicron-covid19-south-africa-data/>