

# Connecting Communities for COVID19 News

## 23rd Dec 2021

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### News Highlights

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#### **Happy Christmas to you all**

- Media Focus has created this hand-picked newsletter of the story of the Covid-19 pandemic on a daily basis since April 2020.
- During the last two years we've sent more than 560 newsletters to subscribers summarising stories from around the world each day.
- We've done so in the teeth of an information pandemic of lies and disinformation, seeking to give subscribers accuracy, prioritise story importance and emphasise the quality in the selection of every story.
- We will be reporting as long as the pandemic. Highlighting the best reporting - seeking to harmonise the message healthcare communicators are promoting.
- We want to build out this news capture tool more next year, so we're looking for partners, innovators with ideas and would be investors.
- We wish you all a Happy Christmas and a successful New Year.

To get in touch: [admin:nfind.uk](mailto:admin:nfind.uk)

### Isolation Tips

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#### **Portugal imposes post-Christmas COVID-19 curbs as Omicron cases surge**

Portugal on Tuesday ordered nightclubs and bars to close and told people to work from home for at least two weeks starting on Saturday to control the spread of COVID-19 over the holiday period. "This still isn't the normal Christmas we are used to," Prime Minister Antonio Costa told a news conference. "If we do not adopt these measures now, the consequences on everyone's lives will be much worse after Christmas and the New Year." Costa also announced capacity restrictions at stores and said a negative coronavirus test would now be required to stay at hotels or go to events.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/portugal-imposes-post-christmas-covid-19-curbs-omicron-cases-surge-2021-12-21/>

#### **Austria tightens restrictions as it braces for Omicron wave**

Austria is introducing restrictions including a 10 p.m. closing time to slow the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant after Christmas and prevent it being imported from Europe's hardest-hit countries, a senior health official said on Wednesday. Austria began emerging from its fourth full coronavirus lockdown 10 days ago. While that three-week lockdown slashed daily COVID-19 infections, the country is bracing for another surge because of the extremely contagious Omicron variant, of which several hundred cases have been confirmed so far.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/austria-restricting-arrivals-uk-denmark-netherlands-over-omicron-2021-12-22/>

### Hygiene Helpers

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#### **Covid-19: In Sweden, a vaccine passport on a microchip implant**

At the beginning of December, Sweden enacted new rules requiring individuals to have a passport at all events with more than 100 people. Following that announcement, the number of people who got microchips inserted under their skin rose: around 6,000 people in Sweden have so far had a chip

inserted in their hands.

<https://www.france24.com/en/video/20211221-covid-19-in-sweden-a-vaccine-passport-on-a-microchip-implant>

### **Finland starts vaccinating children aged 5-11 against COVID**

Finland will from Thursday start offering COVID-19 vaccines to children between 5-11 years of age, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health said on Wednesday. The Finnish Health Institute earlier this month recommended that children aged five and over should be vaccinated against COVID-19 if they or someone in their household were at high risk of severe infection

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-starts-vaccinating-children-aged-5-11-against-covid-2021-12-22/>

### **French rush for COVID tests before Christmas reunions**

Student Jules de Biase is fully vaccinated and has no COVID-19 symptoms, but on Wednesday, ahead of seeing his elderly grandmother over the Christmas holidays, he took a test to be certain he was well. "It's better to be sure you're negative," he said. Many others agree, as the Omicron variant spreads rapidly across France and the rest of western Europe in the run-up to the festive period. Laura Korniak, a 29-year-old communications specialist, said she was also getting tested as a precaution. "I wanted to test before joining my family to celebrate Christmas," she said. COVID PCR and antigen tests are free for people in the French social security system and vaccinated. For others, the tests are some of the cheapest in Europe, with an antigen test typically costing about 25 euros (\$28.27) and a PCR costing less than 50 euros.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/french-rush-covid-tests-before-christmas-reunions-2021-12-22/>

### **Britain to vaccinate vulnerable younger children against COVID-19**

Britain on Wednesday said it would start vaccinating vulnerable children aged five to 11 against COVID-19 after the country's medicines regulator approved the use of a lower dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech shot in that age group. The children will receive two 10-microgram doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine - a third of the adult dose - with an interval of eight weeks between the first and second doses, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) said. A decision on whether to offer vaccination in general to younger children would be taken after additional data on the rapidly spreading Omicron variant and the effect of immunising young children could be considered, the JCVI said.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-approves-pfizer-biontech-shot-younger-children-2021-12-22/>

### **Israel to Offer Fourth Covid-19 Shot to Over 60s**

Israel is set to offer a fourth dose of the Covid-19 vaccine to older people and healthcare workers to reduce the impact of an expected surge of infections driven by the Omicron variant—as two major studies found that the variant causes significantly less serious disease than earlier strains. Researchers at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland concluded that the risk of hospitalization with Omicron was two-thirds lower than with earlier variants. South African researchers said earlier on Wednesday that they estimate the risk of hospitalization at around 70% to 80% lower.

<https://images.wsj.net/im-456643?width=860&size=1.5>

### **Cloth Masks May Not Be Enough in Omicron Fight, Expert Says**

Omicron is once again making people think twice before reaching out for their colorful, reusable cloth face masks. "They can be really good or really terrible," depending on what fabric is used, said Trish Greenhalgh, professor of primary health care services at the University of Oxford. Double or triple-layer masks made of a mix of materials can be more effective, but most cloth coverings are just "fashion accessories," according to Greenhalgh. As the highly infectious omicron causes Covid infections to surge worldwide, governments around the world are tightening restrictions to try and stop its spread. Earlier this month Britain reintroduced compulsory mask wearing on public transport, shops and in some indoor venues, having previously relaxed the rules in the summer.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-22/cloth-masks-may-not-be-enough-in-omicron-fight-expert-says>

## Community Activities

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### **Despite consumption hit, China to stand fast on tough COVID-19 curbs**

China's strict COVID-19 policy is weighing on consumption and rattling foreign firms, but its effectiveness and the imperative to maintain stability heading into a sensitive year mean Beijing will stick to its approach, experts say. China has reported just two COVID-19 fatality this year, retaining a tough line even as many other countries ease restrictions, imposing targeted shutdowns and travel curbs even when they disrupted local economies. Avoiding major outbreaks is especially critical in a year when Beijing hosts both the Winter Olympic Games and the once-every-five-years Communist Party Congress, where President Xi Jinping is expected to clinch a third term as party secretary.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/despite-consumption-hit-china-poised-stand-fast-strict-covid-controls-2021-12-22/>

### **Is It Safe to Fly Right Now? Omicron May Double Infection Risk on Planes: IATA**

Aircraft passengers are twice or even three times more likely to catch Covid-19 during a flight since the emergence of the omicron variant, according to the top medical adviser to the world's airlines. The new strain is highly transmissible and has become dominant in a matter of weeks, accounting for more than 70% of all new cases in the U.S. alone. While hospital-grade air filters on modern passenger jets make the risk of infection much lower on planes than in crowded places on the ground such as shopping malls, omicron is rapidly spreading just as more travelers take to the skies for year-end holidays and family reunions.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-22/omicron-at-least-doubles-risk-of-getting-infected-on-a-plane>

### **Singapore to freeze new ticket sales for quarantine-free arrivals**

Singapore will freeze the sale of tickets for arriving flights and buses under its quarantine-free travel programme for four weeks from Thursday, the government said, citing the risk from the fast-spreading Omicron COVID-19 variant. Under the vaccinated travel lane (VTL) programme, Singapore allows quarantine-free entry for fully vaccinated travellers arriving from certain countries on designated flights or buses. The travellers have to undergo regular testing. About two dozen countries are listed in the programme including Australia, India, Malaysia, Britain and the United States.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/singapore-freeze-new-ticket-sales-quarantine-free-travel-2021-12-22/>

## Working Remotely

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### **Pandemic Remote Work Spawns a New Class of Office Super Commuters**

"Supercommuters" are the workers who — early in the Covid-19 quarantines — untethered themselves from cities where their jobs were or took new ones in far-flung locales, thinking they would be able to work from home forever. Now they're waking up to the reality that their employers want them back, at least a few times a month. Not all of these long-haul travelers have been particularly forthcoming about their arrangements for fear of retaliation by supervisors. Others, daunted by the logistics, have resigned or moved closer to their jobs. While the U.S. workforce grew by 13% from 2010 to 2019, the ranks of supercommuters increased by 45%, according to Chris Salviati, senior housing economist at Apartment List.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-22/pandemic-remote-work-spawns-a-new-class-of-office-super-commuters>

### **Portugal brings forward mandatory remote working**

The Portuguese government decided to bring forward the period when remote working will be mandatory to 25 December, Prime Minister António Costa announced on Tuesday.

[https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/portugal-brings-forward-mandatory-remote-working/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/portugal-brings-forward-mandatory-remote-working/)

## Virtual Classrooms

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### **Edtech should work to replicate universities' social experience**

As universities moved online during the pandemic, an emerging challenge is to replicate the real-world social experiences of universities in an online environment. While many social media giants have brought social interaction online, they have been geared towards the general public, and therefore are not built for the specific needs of students. There is an opportunity for purpose-built technology to provide solutions that are specifically designed to create an academic community. Edtech innovators should be looking at physical campuses and identifying which features can be replicated online.

<https://edtechnology.co.uk/covid-19/edtech-should-work-to-replicate-universities-social-experience/>

### **Get set for the return of virtual learning, warn teaching unions**

Some schools in Kent are already preparing for the prospect of a return to virtual lessons after the New Year, despite the government's insistence that no closures are under consideration. One of the county's largest secondary schools has told senior staff to draw up contingency plans for remote learning when the holiday period ends. Wholesale school closures would be unpopular with both staff and parents, with the new term a crucial period for those taking exams. Covid has already accounted for a drop in attendance rates at schools, prompting fears that the learning loss gap between less-advantaged children and their peers may grow.

<https://www.kentonline.co.uk/kent/news/get-set-for-the-return-of-virtual-learning-warn-teaching-un-259618/>

## Public Policies

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### **WHO boss: western countries' Covid booster drives likely to prolong pandemic**

The world will have enough doses of Covid vaccines early next year to inoculate all of the global adult population – if western countries do not hoard those vaccines to use in blanket booster programmes, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) has said. Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Wednesday there would be sufficient vaccine supplies in global circulation in the first quarter of 2022. “Blanket booster programmes are likely to prolong the Covid-19 pandemic, rather than ending it, by diverting supply to countries that already have high levels of vaccination coverage, giving the virus more opportunity to spread and mutate,” Tedros said, adding: “No country can boost its way out of the pandemic.” His remarks follow predictions by officials with the WHO's Africa region earlier this month that African countries should receive almost a billion doses within the same timeframe.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/22/who-boss-covid-booster-drives-likely-prolong-pandemic>

### **Philippines halves COVID-19 booster wait time to three months**

The Philippines has halved to three months the waiting time for a booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine in its battle to rein in the more infectious Omicron variant of coronavirus, which has forced a global tightening of curbs. The Southeast Asian nation joins Britain, Germany, South Korea and Thailand among a growing list of countries cutting the interval for boosters as they try to stave off a new surge in infections. From Wednesday, adults can receive a booster dose at least three months after taking the second complement of a two-dose vaccine, versus six months earlier, acting presidential spokesperson Karlo Nograles said. Single-dose vaccine recipients are eligible for a booster after two months, he told a regular news conference.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-cuts-covid-19-booster-shot-interval-three-months-2021-12-21/>

### **Pfizer to provide 2.5 mln additional doses of its COVID-19 pill to UK**

Pfizer Inc said on Wednesday it will provide an additional 2.5 million doses of its COVID-19 pill Paxlovid to the United Kingdom. A total of 2.75 million doses of the pill are expected to be delivered to the UK through 2022, the drugmaker said.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/pfizer-provide-25-mln-additional-doses-its-covid-19-pill>

[-uk-2021-12-22/](#)

### **Slovakia to ship 200000 COVID-19 shots to Omicron-hit Denmark**

Slovakia will supply 200,000 Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccines to fellow EU member Denmark in January to help its booster campaign as infections from the fast-spreading Omicron variant soar, the Slovak Health Ministry said on Wednesday. A ministry document discussed by the government said Denmark had asked for vaccines to be supplied without delay. "With regard to data and the speed of vaccinations in Slovakia as well as the amount in storage, the Slovak Republic is able to provide Denmark 200,000 doses in January," it said.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovakia-ship-200000-covid-19-shots-omicron-hit-denmark-2021-12-22/>

### **France cancels order for Merck's COVID-19 antiviral drug**

France has cancelled its order for Merck & Co's COVID-19 antiviral drug following disappointing trial data and hopes instead to receive Pfizer's competing drug before the end of January, the health minister said on Wednesday. France is the first country to publicly say it has cancelled an order for the Merck treatment after the company released data in late November suggesting its drug was markedly less effective than previously thought, reducing hospitalisations and deaths in its clinical trial of high-risk individuals by about 30%. "The latest studies weren't good," Olivier Veran told BFM TV. A spokesperson for Merck said the country's planned purchase did not take place after the French health authority refused to authorise the pill earlier this month.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-cancels-order-mercks-covid-19-antiviral-drug-2021-12-22/>

### **Turkey's domestic COVID-19 vaccine receives emergency use authorisation -minister**

Turkey's domestically developed COVID-19 vaccine, Turkovac, has received emergency use authorisation by Turkish authorities and will be open to use from next weekend, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said on Wednesday. Turkey began developing Turkovac this year, but the launch date for the vaccine has been beset by delays. President Tayyip Erdogan has said Turkey would make the shot available globally.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/turkeys-domestic-covid-19-vaccine-receives-emergency-use-authorisation-minister-2021-12-22/>

## **Maintaining Services**

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### **Germany says FOURTH Covid shot needed to tackle Omicron as health minister backs vaccine mandate**

Germany has warned a fourth Covid vaccine will be needed to stop the spread of the contagious Omicron variant. Health minister Karl Lauterbach, who has thrown his support behind a vaccine mandate, has ordered 80million doses of a Biontech vaccine which targets Omicron and should arrive in Germany by May. He has also ordered 4million doses of the newly approved vaccine Novavax - seen as more acceptable to vaccine sceptics - and 11million doses of the new Valneva shot, which is waiting for marketing authorisation.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10337035/Germany-says-FOURTH-Covid-shot-needed-tackle-Omicron-health-minister-backs-vaccine-mandate.html>

### **Australian PM says no Xmas lockdown as hospitals coping with rising Omicron**

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Wednesday ruled out a Christmas lockdown, saying hospitals were coping well with a record surge in COVID-19 cases fuelled by the Omicron variant. Australia is grappling with the more transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus as restrictions ease ahead of the Christmas holidays after higher vaccination levels were reached. "Despite these rising cases, hospitals and health systems remain in a strong position but of course they will be tested," Morrison told reporters in Canberra after an emergency Cabinet meeting.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australias-national-cabinet-meet-early-amid-omicron-surge-2021-12-21/>

## **U.K. on Edge Heading Into Christmas Overshadowed by Omicron**

Boris Johnson has given Britons the Christmas he has long promised -- some light-touch pandemic restrictions but with no limits on family gatherings. The big question is over what comes next. When the U.K. prime minister ruled out tighter restrictions in the coming days, he also urged Britons to be cautious and warned tougher curbs may yet be needed after Dec. 25 if an omicron-fueled wave of Covid-19 infections threatens to overwhelm the National Health Service.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-22/u-k-heads-into-christmas-uncertain-about-covid-rules-afterward?srnd=premium-europe>

## **Healthcare Innovations**

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### **Army to announce it has developed a single vaccine that protects from ALL variants of COVID and SARS**

Walter Reed Army Institute of Research is set to announce the development of a vaccine that is effective against all COVID and SARS variants. Army researchers at Walter Reed have been working on a vaccine for two years. The Spike Ferritin Nanoparticle COVID-19 vaccine (SpFN) has so far been proven to protect against all existing and potential variants of the viruses. The Omicron COVID variant has been quickly spreading across the world and now accounts for 73 per cent of all new diagnoses in the US. Some states including New York and neighboring New Jersey say the super-infectious variant is behind 90 per cent of positive cases there

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10335105/Army-announce-developed-single-vaccine-protects-variants-COVID-SARS.html>

### **Some reduction in hospitalisation for Omicron v Delta in England: early analysis**

Estimates suggest Omicron cases are 15% less likely to attend hospital, and 40% less likely to be hospitalised for a night or more, compared to Delta. The researchers stress that these estimated reductions in severity must be balanced against the larger risk of infection with Omicron, due to the reduction in protection provided by both vaccination and natural infection. For example, at a population level, large numbers of infections could still lead to large numbers of hospitalisations. They say the estimates provided in this paper will assist in refining mathematical models of potential healthcare demand associated with the unfolding European Omicron wave.

<http://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/232882/some-reduction-hospitalisation-omicron-delta-england>

### **Omicron COVID symptoms milder than Delta in UK, early data suggests**

Britons who fall ill with the Omicron variant of the coronavirus are less likely to become severely sick than those who contract Delta, U.K. government scientists are set to say in early real-world data on the severity of the disease. But while Omicron cases in the U.K. seem milder overall, the U.K. Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has found it is not necessarily mild enough to avoid large numbers of hospitalizations, according to the data, which is due to be published before Christmas and was previewed by POLITICO's London Playbook. The UKHSA found evidence that for those who do become severely ill with Omicron, there is still a high chance of hospitalization and death. The scientists also confirmed that the transmissibility of Omicron is very high, meaning that even though it is milder, infections could rocket to the point large numbers could still end up in hospital. The UKHSA is also expected to conclude that while two doses of a COVID vaccine are not enough to offer strong protection against Omicron, a booster dose does significantly reduce the chance of both symptomatic infection and hospitalization, London Playbook reported. A UKHSA spokesperson said they would not comment on unpublished data.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/omicron-variant-coronavirus-symptoms-milder-delta-uk-data/>

### **S.African study offers Omicron hope as nations reimpose curbs**

South African data offered a glimmer of hope on Wednesday about the severity of the Omicron coronavirus variant, but World Health Organization officials cautioned that it was too soon to draw

firm conclusions as the strain spread across the globe. With the second Christmas of the pandemic days away, countries imposed new restrictions on their citizens while worrying about the damage the variant might inflict on their economies. Plans for Christmas parties and celebrations were wiped out from London to New Delhi amid the uncertainty.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/the-great-reboot/omicrons-march-revives-urgent-global-calls-vaccinations-2021-12-22/>

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