

Israel struggles with COVID surge despite mass vaccinations



The fast spread of the Delta variant caught mostly vaccinated Israelis by surprise [File: Ronen Zvulun/Reuters]

West Jerusalem, August 23 (RHC)-- In the 32 C (89.6 F) heat of an Israeli summer, parents and children waited -- some patiently and some less so -- in a line outside a testing station for their children's turn to receive the newly approved Sofia COVID-19 test.

Some had plans to go to a water park, others to a museum, and others just out to eat. But the children, aged three to 12, needed to get a coronavirus test first to do so.

As of August 20, “Green Passes” are required to enter restaurants, public pools, museums or any other public place besides parks. The pass is issued to people who have received two vaccine doses or who have recovered from coronavirus. But unlike in the past, children who are not eligible to get vaccinated must have the pass, too.

“It’s hard,” said Shira Elkin, who winced when she had to pin down her frightened and crying four-year-old to allow the medic to take a swab sample from inside her nose. “But I understand that it’s important and I’m ready to make the effort.”

The results of the fast tests come in 15 minutes, but they are only good for 24 hours and some parents have found themselves waiting in line for more than an hour and doing so for consecutive days since the requirement went into effect.

“If they make us do this every day, I’ll pull my hair out,” said Tamar Cohen, who waited with her husband and two young daughters. “It’s ridiculous. We can’t wait in line every day.”

The requirement is the latest – and the most draconian – move in the Israeli government’s battle against the Delta variant, which has hit Israel hard. The fast spread of the variant caught Israelis by surprise.

Israel was one of the first countries to vaccinate the majority of its population and by March most Israelis were already putting COVID-19 behind them.

By June, the mandatory mask requirement was completely dropped and the only restrictions that remained concerned the entry and exit from the country. Now the rate of infection has risen to 5.4 percent and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has said he will take every action possible to lower the rate and avoid going to a fourth lockdown.

Health experts say there are two main reasons the Delta variant hit Israel so hard. For one, Israelis were flouting the mask requirements, which were re-imposed at the end of June. Now police are handing out fines to those who do not wear a face covering.

The other reason given for the high rate of infection is that most Israelis were vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine, which data shows is less effective than the Moderna jab against the virus.

“It’s true that Moderna has better protected people from infection, but the two vaccines are almost equivalent in effectiveness against severe disease,” said Professor Cyril Cohen, vice dean of life sciences at Bar Ilan university and a member of the health ministry’s coronavirus vaccine advisory board. “This is important so that our hospitals won’t be overwhelmed.”

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