

France reports daily record of 208,000 COVID cases

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France breaks another national and European record of daily COVID infections, as Omicron and Delta variants spread.

Paris, December 30 (RHC)-- France is seeing a “tsunami” of COVID-19 infections, with 208,000 cases reported during the past 24 hours on Wednesday, a new national and European record, Health Minister

Olivier Veran has told lawmakers.

France has been breaking infection records repeatedly during the past few days, with Tuesday's 180,000 cases already the highest for a country in Europe, according to data on Covidtracker.fr.

"This means that 24 hours a day, day and night, every second in our country, two French people are diagnosed positive," Veran said. "We have never experienced such a situation," he said, describing the increase in cases as "dizzying."

Global COVID-19 infections have hit record highs during the past seven days, data from the Reuters and AFP news agencies showed on Wednesday, as the new Omicron variant spreads rapidly, keeping many workers at home and overwhelming testing centres.

The situation in French hospitals was already worrying because of the Delta variant, Veran said, with Omicron yet to have an impact, something he said would eventually happen. "We have two enemies," he said, referring to the two main variants. "As for Omicron, I would no longer talk about a wave. This is a groundswell, where several waves combine to form one massive wave," he said.

The minister had warned on Monday that France could reach more than 250,000 daily COVID cases by the beginning of January, as a week of unrestricted Christmas parties and family get-togethers fuel the spread of the disease.

After a cabinet meeting to discuss the crisis on Monday, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced several measures to try to contain the epidemic, but shied away from the mass closures or lockdowns that have been reintroduced in other EU countries such as the Netherlands.

Some of the new restrictions, such as a ban on eating on high-speed trains or standing up in cafes and bars, were denounced by critics and political opponents as being too limited to be effective. The government announced on Wednesday that the country's roughly 1,600 nightclubs would remain closed for a further three weeks after they were ordered shut on December 6.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin has also encouraged local officials to limit public New Year's Eve gatherings, in particular by requiring face masks outdoors and stepping up police patrols to enforce a ban on public alcohol consumption for the night.

Daily hospital admissions for COVID in France are averaging above 1,000 a day, still well below the peak of 3,500 during the first wave in April 2020 or nearly 3,000 in the second wave in November last year. But the exponential growth in case numbers is causing alarm.

The French Federation of Hospitals said on Tuesday that "additional measures in order to protect public hospitals are necessary in order to avoid saturating health services and emergency wards which will inevitably lead to more cancelled operations".

Many hospitals, particularly those in the hotspots of France and the southern Mediterranean coast, are already cancelling non-essential operations due to the surge in COVID admissions, most of which are unvaccinated people.

Despite France having one of the highest vaccination rates in the world, with 90 percent of the eligible population having had at least one dose, Veran said that there were still five million unvaccinated people who are old enough to get the jabs.

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