

Coronavirus isolation period extended from seven to 10 days



LONDON: People who test positive for coronavirus or show symptoms in the UK must now self-isolate for at least 10 days, rather than seven.

The change, announced by the UK's chief medical officers, comes as ministers try to avoid a resurgence of the virus.

Until now, those showing key symptoms - a new continuous cough, a temperature or loss of taste or smell - have had to self-isolate for at least a week.

The new advice is in line with World Health Organization guidance. The chief medical officers said the change is "particularly important to protect those who have been shielding and in advance of the autumn and winter when we may see increased community transmission". Evidence shows that people with Covid-19 have "a low but real possibility of infectiousness" between seven and nine days after falling ill, they said.

People are most contagious just before they first display symptoms and for the first few days afterwards. But scientists say evidence that they could pass it on up to nine days later has "strengthened".

Advice on the length of isolation varies between countries. For example, the Irish Republic says those who have symptoms should isolate for 14 days, while

in the US those with symptoms are told to isolate for 10 days and can only leave isolation if they have had at least 24 hours without a fever. It comes after the prime minister warned of signs of a "second wave" of the pandemic in parts of Europe. Speaking on BBC Breakfast before the announcement, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the government wanted to "take a precautionary approach" and "protect people from that wave reaching our shores".

Frank Atherton, chief medical officer for Wales, said the change was "vital" and "nobody should be under the illusion that coronavirus has gone away".

UK signs deal for 60 million virus vaccine doses
The government has also confirmed that registered health and care professionals travelling to the UK from high-risk countries will be required to self-isolate for 14 days. A quarantine exemption for health professionals had been in place since June. There have also been concerns about several local outbreaks across the UK, including in Oldham, Wrexham and Staffordshire.

Meanwhile, the government is expected on Friday to announce a decision on whether to ease restrictions in Leicester, a month after the city was put into extended lockdown following a spike in cases. —AFP

What's the evidence Europe is having a 'second wave'?

LONDON: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has warned there are signs of a "second wave" of coronavirus cases in Europe, but what's the evidence for that?

Talk of a second wave is the stuff of nightmares, conjuring up images of another deadly surge of infections.

This is what happened with Spanish Flu after the First World War when a second wave proved deadlier than the first.

But the truth is many experts try to avoid the phrase altogether. Margaret Harris, from the World Health Organization, has made clear that what we have seen is "one big wave" that is making its way across the globe.

Some countries, such as South Korea and Singapore, have been better than others at flattening it from the start by stopping the virus spreading by using comprehensive testing and tracing regimes.

But others - and the UK, France, Spain and Italy are examples of this - have just managed to flatten it partway through the wave by introducing lockdowns.

This was because they did not have such sophisticated infectious disease systems in place to control the virus.

Thanks to investment, they are in a much stronger position now and have been able to release lockdown, while still trying to suppress the virus wave through testing and tracing.

But there are signs cases are picking up, especially in Spain. But rather than this being a second wave - or the start of one - perhaps we are better off thinking of these as the existing wave bursting through the defences.

Prof Paul Hunter, a Covid expert at Norwich Medical School, says for it to be a second wave the virus would have to have gone away completely, so he prefers to call it a "resurgence".

And really it should come as no surprise that this happens in highly-populated areas like Western Europe.

Containing the virus relies on good systems for detecting cases and for the public to play its part by social distancing, and engaging with the test and trace systems.

Clearly any weakness leaves countries susceptible, particularly to this virus which can be transmitted even if people are not displaying symptoms. However, while cases may be going up, it is worth noting they are nowhere near the levels seen during the peak of the pandemic. And bear in mind that the peaks seen in the charts above for all the countries - bar maybe Germany which had widespread testing in place quickly - are a gross underestimate of the true scale of infections.

That's because there was not widespread testing available at the time. In the UK alone it is estimated that there were 100,000 cases a day at the peak - 20 times more than the testing in place at the time suggested. —AFP



Australia's Victoria records huge case jump



SYDNEY: Australia's virus-hit state of Victoria has reported its worst death toll and case rise, prompting fears that a six-week lockdown of state capital Melbourne is not working.

The state confirmed 13 new deaths and 723 new cases on Thursday - a 36% jump on the case record set on Monday.

There are fears now that Melbourne's lockdown, which began on 7 July, will need to be extended.

The spike meant Australia overall had its deadliest day in the pandemic.

A 14th person died late on Thursday but his death will be included in Friday's figures as it was announced after the government's briefing.

Officials in Victoria renewed appeals for people with symptoms to get tested quickly.

Last week, the Victorian government said sick people breaking isola-

tion rules - or not getting tested in time - was leading to continued spread despite lockdown measures.

"If you've got symptoms, the only thing you can do is get tested," said Premier Daniel Andrews.

"You just can't go to work. Because all you'll be doing is spreading the virus."

Thursday's figures dash hopes that recent lower case numbers indicated the state had turned a corner.

Under Melbourne's second stay-at-home order, people cannot leave their home except for exercise, food shopping, work and care-giving.

Melbourne has also become the first Australian city to make mask-wearing mandatory in public, and this will be extended to all of Victoria from Monday.

Why did the virus re-emerge in Melbourne?

Melbourne returns to full lockdown
Premier Andrews said the latest case numbers reflected the virus's hold in the city's nursing homes - with one in six cases linked to residents and staff.

Elderly people have made up the majority of deaths reported in the past fortnight.

By Frances Mao, BBC News, Sydney
When the numbers first leaked out this morning, I heard a reporter on air say he hoped his source was wrong. More than 700 cases - it is a crushing blow for Melbourne's five million people. Halfway through the second lockdown, everyone was hoping their hard work would start to pay off and that the tide would turn.

But it does not look like things will get better any time soon - which means a longer lockdown could be likely. Lockdown life is harder for Melbournians this time around because they are

going through it alone. The rest of the country has almost all its freedoms back; so they can see on social media their friends elsewhere going out and living it up.

But in Sydney some of the fear has returned too. This slow creep of cases - under 20 each day for a few weeks - has people confused and on edge. Do you cancel your dinner plans now? Or do you keep going because you want to help the economy? Just where is the virus and why isn't it showing up?

Just last month, we were celebrating the idea that Australia had escaped relatively unscathed - compared to other nations. It is only now that we are getting a sense of the real struggle. Due to a successful suppression of the virus in the first months of the pandemic, Australia maintains numbers far lower than many other countries - with about 16,000 cases and 189 deaths. —AFP

Coronavirus: England highest level of excess deaths

LONDON: The UK saw some of the biggest rises in deaths rates in Europe in the months until the middle of June, official analysis shows.

England saw the largest increase in death rates in Europe, with Scotland seeing the third largest increase.

The Office for National Statistics says that Spain saw the highest peak in rates of death in Europe.

But the UK had the longest period of above-average deaths and so overall saw higher death rates.

By 29 May, the death rate in England was 7.5% higher than it has been in recent years.

Spain's increase, 6.7%, was the second highest in the countries stud-

ied followed by Scotland's rise of 5.1%.

Wales and Northern Ireland both also featured in the list of hardest-hit countries.

The ONS analysis also looked at how individual cities were affected.

Cities in Spain and Italy, like Barcelona, Milan and Madrid, were harder hit than any city in the UK.

But the analysis also shows the epidemic in the UK was more widespread than in other countries.

Seven of the 15 cities with the biggest rise in death rates are in the UK.

Edward Morgan of the ONS said the wide spread of the virus combined with the relatively slow down-

ward "tail" of the pandemic in the UK were key reasons that England saw 'the highest overall relative excess mortality out of all the European countries compared'.

Is Europe having a 'second wave'?

Virus isolation extended from seven to 10 days
'Covid took nine of the people I care for'

What do global death patterns reveal about the UK?

During a visit to North Yorkshire, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was asked if he was ashamed that England had the highest excess death rate in Europe.

He said: "We mourn every loss of

life that we've had throughout the coronavirus epidemic."

I live my sister's death every day!
Karren Fraser-Knight's identical twin sister Paula Greenhough was admitted to Stepping Hill Hospital in Stockport with coronavirus symptoms in March.

The 55-year-old was put on a ventilator but died on 3 April.

"This is not grief, it is trauma, it is PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), I live my sister's death every single day of my life," Ms Fraser-Knight told the BBC.

"If they (the government) had acted immediately, thousands of people including Paula Greenhough would not be dead today. —AFP



One in three children 'exposed to lead' globally



DUBAI: One in three children could have been exposed to poisonous lead, potentially causing irreversible harm, research into the global risk of exposure has found.

Unicef and Pure Earth estimate around 800 million children might be affected, with most in low and middle-income countries.

South Asia accounts for almost half the global total.

Poorly recycled lead batteries, e-waste, mining and paints are the main sources of poisoning, the report says. The report's authors say their findings were mainly based on data from the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington, which obtained results of blood tests on tens of thousands of children across the globe.

IHME publishes the research tool, the Global Burden of Disease

"Vehicles in low and middle-income countries have tripled since 2000 and that has led to a graphic rise in lead acid battery recycling, often in an unsafe way," Dr Nicholas Rees, one of the report's authors, told the BBC.

About 85% of all the lead used in the world goes to produce lead-acid batteries, and the vast majority comes from recycled car batteries. "As a result, as much as half of the used lead-acid batteries end up in the informal economy," the report says.

"Unregulated and often illegal recycling operations break open battery cases, spilling acid and lead dust onto the ground, and [there is] smelt lead in open-air furnaces that spew toxic fumes and dust that contaminate surrounding neighbourhoods."

Experts say children's intake of food, liquid and air is up to five times more than that

of adults, if the body-weight ratio is compared.

"That means they can absorb more of this potent neurotoxin if it has leached into the soil and water or has spread in the air where the child is," says the report.

It adds that babies and children under five are at high risk, because their brains can be damaged even before they get to fully develop, leading to lifelong neurological, cognitive and physical impairment.

"Lead is a potent neurotoxin that, with even low-level lead exposure, is associated with a reduction in IQ scores, shortened attention spans, and potentially violent - and even criminal - behaviour later in life."

The report says India has the largest number - more than 275 million children - with blood lead levels of more than five micro-