

COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

3rd Feb 2022

Lockdown Exit

Exposure to one nasal droplet enough for Covid infection - study

Exposure to a single nasal droplet is sufficient to become infected with Covid-19, according to a landmark trial in which healthy volunteers were intentionally given a dose of the virus. The trial, the first to have monitored people during the entire course of infection, also found that people typically develop symptoms very quickly – on average, within two days of encountering the virus – and are most infectious five days into the infection. The study was carried out using a strain of the virus before the emergence of the Alpha, Delta and Omicron variants. The trial's chief investigator, Prof Christopher Chiu, of Imperial College London, said: "Our study reveals some very interesting clinical insights, particularly around the short incubation period of the virus, extremely high viral shedding from the nose, as well as the utility of lateral flow tests, with potential implications for public health."

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/02/exposure-to-one-nasal-droplet-enough-for-covid-infection-study>

Uganda's night life roars back after nearly two years of COVID restrictions

Throng of revellers filled The Levels bar in Uganda's capital Kampala, dancing to live music and ordering bottle service to their tables, on Monday night. Nearly two years after the government shut down bars and nightclubs and banned outdoor musical performances and other entertainment activities to combat COVID-19,

<https://www.cnbc.com/2022/ugandas-night-life-roars-back-after-nearly-two-years-of-covid-restrictions/>

Germany to allow large events with up to 10000 spectators

Germany will allow up to 10,000 spectators at major outdoor events such as Bundesliga soccer games, the 16 federal states agreed on Wednesday. The decision, which also allows up to 4,000 participants in indoor spaces, aims to harmonize currently varying rules for stadium attendance at a state-by-state level. The new rules take effect as soon as the federal states update their regulation. Masks must be worn, and proof of vaccination or recovery, as well as a booster shot or negative test status, depending on the state, will also be required, said the resolution seen by Reuters.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-passes-10-million-mark-covid-19-infections-2022-02-02/>

Finnish government to remove COVID-19 restrictions

Finland will begin lifting restrictions put in place to check the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant, with the aim of removing all curbs at the beginning of March, Prime Minister Sanna Marin told reporters on Wednesday. Heavy restrictions put in place just after Christmas had forced many restaurants and cultural and sports venues to temporarily lay off staff and cancel events. The government now plans to allow restaurants to remain open until midnight and remove curbs on public gatherings from Feb. 14, Marin said, adding the aim is to remove all restrictions at the start of next month.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finnish-government-remove-covid-19-restrictions-2022-02-02/>

Norway ends most curbs despite rising COVID infections

Norway will scrap most of its remaining COVID-19 lockdown measures with immediate effect as a spike in coronavirus infections is unlikely to jeopardise health services, the prime minister said on Tuesday. Restaurants will again be allowed to serve alcohol beyond 11 o'clock at night, working from home will no longer be mandatory and the limit of 10 visitors in private homes will be removed, Jonas Gahr Støre told a news conference. "Even if many more people are becoming infected, there

are fewer who are hospitalised. We're well protected by vaccines. This means that we can relax many measures even as infections are rising rapidly," Stoere said.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/norway-bins-most-pandemic-curbs-2022-02-01/>

Pfizer asks FDA to allow COVID-19 vaccine for kids under 5

Pfizer on Tuesday asked the U.S. to authorize extra-low doses of its COVID-19 vaccine for children under 5, potentially opening the way for the very youngest Americans to start receiving shots as early as March. In an extraordinary move, the Food and Drug Administration had urged Pfizer and its partner BioNTech to apply earlier than the companies had planned — and before it's settled if the youngsters will need two shots or three. The nation's 19 million children under 5 are the only group not yet eligible for vaccination against the coronavirus. Many parents have been pushing for an expansion of shots to toddlers and preschoolers, especially as the omicron variant sent record numbers of youngsters to the hospital.

<https://apnews.com/article/covid-vaccine-children-pfizer-07d72ab0b76329d3899c135afd2a93f5>

Olympic advisors at ease with COVID rate, see cases falling

With more than 30 new COVID-19 cases being detected daily ahead of the Beijing Olympics, organizers said Wednesday they aren't worried and expect numbers to drop within days. A total of 32 new cases — 15 in tests of people arriving at the airport and 17 within the Olympic bubbles — were reported by the Beijing organizing committee on Wednesday, two days before the opening ceremony. The average was 31 cases over the past three days. Athletes and team officials accounted for nine of the latest cases and 23 were "stakeholders," a category that includes workers and media. Athletes testing positive now could miss their events. Eleven people have been treated at the hospital for a symptom among the 232 positive tests registered since Jan. 23, though "none of those are seriously ill in any way," Olympic medical advisor Brian McCloskey said.

<https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-coronavirus-pandemic-sports-health-beijing-83a375acae5e3a1080b7b128795dba52>

Beijing says COVID-19 situation 'controllable,' 'safe'

Beijing reported three new COVID-19 cases on Wednesday as officials said the virus situation was under control with the Olympic Games set to open later in the week. The three cases reported in the 24-hour period from Tuesday to Wednesday all involved people under some sort of quarantine. "The current pandemic situation in the capital is overall controllable and it's headed in a good direction," said Xu Hejian, a spokesman for the city government, at a daily press briefing. "Beijing is safe." The Chinese capital has been on high-alert as it prepares to host the Winter Olympics starting Friday.

<https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-coronavirus-pandemic-sports-health-beijing-3ef7fe8c79db51725420eb9a0d3baed4>

U.S. considers authorization of first COVID vaccine for children under 5

U.S. regulators are considering the first COVID-19 vaccine for children under the age of 5, the only age group not yet eligible for the shots, after Pfizer Inc (PFE.N) and BioNTech SE began the regulatory approval process on Tuesday. A decision is expected as soon as this month. The companies said they began submitting data for an emergency use authorization even though they did not meet a key target in their clinical trial of 2- to 4- year olds. They are submitting the data at the request of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in order to address an urgent public health need in the age group, they said.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/pfizer-submits-data-seeking-us-approval-covid-vaccine-young-kids-bloomberg-2022-02-01/>

Czech Republic to end mandatory COVID testing this month

The Czech Republic's government has agreed to end mandatory coronavirus testing at schools and companies this month, the prime minister said Wednesday. The testing "undoubtedly" helped slow

down the spread of infections and prevented the health system from being overwhelmed, Prime Minister Petr Fiala said. "Given the development, we've decided to end the compulsory testing on Feb. 18," Fiala said. All company employees have been tested twice a week while schoolchildren and all school employees have been tested once a week since Jan. 17.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-education-731de0e97c6cfe997c7550d680f26408>

Daily Covid death toll will no longer be published by Easter under plan to 'live with Covid', source says

The Government has refused to rule out cancelling the daily publication of Covid deaths after a senior Whitehall source told i that Boris Johnson wants to end the update by Easter "at the latest". Downing Street, the Department of Health and Social Care and the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) all refused to comment on proposals to bring an end to the daily Covid figures that have become part of the daily routine of the pandemic. However, a senior Whitehall source familiar with the plans told i: "The Prime Minister has pencilled in Easter as the latest date by which the daily Covid statistics will be published in their current form. In an ideal situation he will bring an end to them sooner if the current downward trend in deaths continues."

<https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/government-daily-uk-covid-figures-stats-axed-easter-whitehall-1436139>

Exit Strategies

Washington state attorney general sues Covid-19 testing company that has more than 275 locations nationwide

Prosecutors are suing an Illinois-based Covid-19 testing company over allegedly storing tests in garbage bags, operating without licensure in some locations and improperly collecting customers' insurance information. Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson filed the lawsuit Monday against the Center for COVID Control (CCC), its testing lab and two of its co-founders, according to a news release from his office. The company "frequently failed to report any test results at all, causing potentially COVID-19 free individuals to isolate and miss work, travel, and time with loved ones unnecessarily," and often provided inaccurate results, the lawsuit alleges.

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/02/us/covid-19-testing-company-sued/index.html>

Beijing says COVID-19 situation 'controllable,' 'safe'

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<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/beijing-covid-chinese-b2005887.html>

Fighting COVID will help economy recover faster, lower inflation -IMF's Georgieva

The COVID-19 pandemic remains the biggest risk to the global economy, and is contributing to rising inflation in many countries, International Monetary Fund chief Kristalina Georgieva said on Wednesday. Georgieva urged redoubled efforts to boost vaccinations and beef up defenses against the coronavirus, saying such moves -- coupled with interest rate increases now being eyed or executed by central banks -- would help ease supply chain disruptions and combat inflation. "Pandemic policy is economic policy," the IMF chief said. "The biggest risk for the performance of the

world economy remains this year COVID and the disruption it causes."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/fighting-covid-will-help-economy-recover-faster-lower-inflation-imfs-georgieva-2022-02-02/>

U.S. Army begins discharging soldiers who refuse COVID-19 vaccine

U.S. soldiers who refuse to get a COVID-19 vaccine will be immediately discharged, the U.S. Army said on Wednesday, saying the move was critical to maintain combat readiness. The Army's order applies to regular Army soldiers, active-duty Army reservists and cadets unless they have approved or pending exemptions, it said in a statement. The discharge order is the latest from a U.S. military branch removing unvaccinated service members amid the pandemic after the Pentagon made the vaccine mandatory for all service members in August 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-army-discharge-soldiers-who-refuse-covid-19-vaccine-2022-02-02/>

Many countries yet to see peak in Omicron wave, should ease curbs slowly -WHO

Many countries have not reached their peak in cases of the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus and measures imposed to curb its spread should be eased slowly, the World Health Organization's technical lead on COVID-19 said on Tuesday. "We are urging caution because many countries have not gone through the peak of Omicron yet. Many countries have low levels of vaccination coverage with very vulnerable individuals within their populations," Maria Van Kerkhove told an online briefing. "And so now is not the time to lift everything all at once. We have always urged, always (be) very cautious, in applying interventions as well as lifting those interventions in a steady and in a slow way, piece by piece

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-yet-peak-many-countries-caution-needed-who-2022-02-01/>

'Take back life': More nations ease coronavirus restrictions

Late-night partying at clubs. Elbow-to-elbow seating in movie theaters. Going without masks in public, especially in Europe and North America: Step by step, many countries are easing their COVID-19 restrictions amid hopes the omicron wave may have passed its peak. The early moves to relax precautions, based on declining or flattening case counts in recent days, represent what could be another turning point in a nearly two-year pandemic that has been full of them. The extraordinarily contagious omicron has fueled more cases worldwide over the past 10 weeks — 90 million — than were seen during all of 2020, the outbreak's first full year. But the World Health Organization this week said some countries can now consider carefully relaxing the rules if they have high immunity rates, their health care systems are strong and the epidemiological trends are going in the right direction.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-pandemics-united-nations-ca046d38f7e78ad7150a0a8d95d81433>

As Omicron Shows Signs of Peaking in Europe, France Eases Restrictions

France allowed workers to return to offices full time Wednesday amid signs the Omicron wave of Covid-19 is approaching its peak in Europe. In the U.S., the number of infections has been in decline for weeks, helping to ease pressure on hospitals.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-omicron-shows-signs-of-peaking-in-europe-france-eases-restrictions-11643801598>

More European Countries to Ease Covid Restrictions: Italy, Switzerland, Finland

Europe is accelerating steps to roll back coronavirus restrictions as efforts to control the fast-spreading omicron variant have been largely futile. Under pressure from a pandemic-weary public, politicians across the region are deeming many public-health measures increasingly unnecessary. Italy, Switzerland and Finland are set to join Denmark, Ireland and France in easing the bulk of restrictions on public life. Norway also relaxed most rules. While the virus continues to spread rapidly across the continent -- with more than 2.4 million cases over the past two days -- the alert

level has dropped.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-02/europe-accelerates-move-to-pandemic-exit-on-waning-scare-factor>

Switzerland to Scrap Work-From-Home Requirement and Ease Other Covid Rules

Switzerland will consider lifting almost all pandemic-related rules, including showing Covid certificates in restaurants and wearing masks on public transport, later this month. The country will scrap a working-from-home requirement, turning it into a recommendation, as well as end quarantine for those who have come into contact with someone who has tested positive for the virus, from Thursday. "Today is a great day," Swiss President Ignazio Cassis said. "This beautiful day marks the beginning of a new stage in this long and difficult crisis. Of course, this does not mean that the pandemic is over, but we see a light at the end of the tunnel."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-02/switzerland-to-scrap-wfh-quarantine-for-contacts-from-thursday>

Swiss start relaxing pandemic measures

Switzerland began on Wednesday easing its coronavirus pandemic restrictions as fears waned that the spike in infection cases fuelled by the highly contagious Omicron variant would overwhelm the health care system.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/swiss-start-relaxing-pandemic-measures-2022-02-02/>

Britain reports 534 COVID deaths, highest in nearly a year

COVID-19 infections and deaths in the Americas are still increasing, but the rise in infections seems to be slowing down in places hit earliest by the Omicron variant, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) said on Wednesday. Most of the 7 million new cases reported in the past week were in North America -- some 4 million new infections -- while Chile and Brazil posted record numbers of daily cases. Deaths have more than doubled in Cuba, the Bahamas and Antigua and Barbuda, the regional health agency said.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-infections-slowing-where-variant-first-hit-says-regional-agency-2022-02-02/>

Partisan Exits

Spotify's plan to add advisory to COVID podcasts is a positive step -White House

Spotify's plan to add a content advisory to any discussion of COVID-19 on its platform is a positive step, but tech platforms should do more to prevent the spread of misinformation on the coronavirus, the White House said on Tuesday. "Our hope is all major tech platforms and all major news sources for that matter be responsible and be vigilant to ensure that the American people have access to accurate information on something as significant as COVID-19", White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters in a briefing. "This disclaimer - it's a positive step, but we want every platform to continue doing more to call out misinformation."

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/white-house-says-tech-platforms-should-do-more-combat-covid-misinformation-2022-02-01/>

The cognitive bias that tripped us up during the pandemic

The issues with COVID communication are not limited to the statistics describing the spread and prevalence of the pandemic or the safe distance we should keep from others. Initially, we were told that "herd immunity" appears once 60%-70% of the population has gained immunity either through infection or vaccination. Later, with more studies and analysis this number was more accurately predicted to be around 90%-95%, which is meaningfully larger than the initial number. However, as shown in our study, the role of that initial number can be profound and a simple update wasn't enough to remove it from people's minds.

<https://theconversation.com/the-cognitive-bias-that-tripped-us-up-during-the-pandemic-175015>

Fraudulent Covid-19 Test Sites Proliferate, Triggering Consumer Warnings

Officials nationwide are trying to stay ahead of a proliferation of Covid-19 test sites that they say are offering fraudulent services to the public. Attorneys general in states including New Mexico, Oregon, Florida, Minnesota, New York and Illinois have shut down pop-up test locations, or issued warnings, citing late or false test results and theft of people's personal information. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has warned that "scammers are preying on people looking for Covid tests." Authorities have alleged that the operators of these sites are making money by sending bills to people whose insurance is supposed to cover Covid-19 tests or falsely claiming consumers are uninsured as a way to seek reimbursement from the federal government.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/fraudulent-covid-19-test-sites-proliferate-triggering-consumer-warnings-11643810401>

Covid Pandemic Hits Particularly Hard for Those With Long-Term Disabilities

Around one in five disabled people believe life will never return to normal following the coronavirus pandemic, a survey suggests. Some 18% of those questioned by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said they do not think life will ever get back to normal. This compared with 11% of non-disabled respondents. Disabled people said the pandemic has affected their lives more than non-disabled people in two key areas. These were access to healthcare and treatment for non-coronavirus related issues (58% for the disabled compared with 31% for non-disabled people), and wellbeing (55% versus 35%). Disabled people were more likely to report worse mental health, anxiety, depression and loneliness, the study found.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-02/covid-pandemic-hits-particularly-hard-for-those-with-long-term-disabilities>

Virginia governor sued again over order to make masks optional in schools

A civil liberties group said on Tuesday it sued Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin and his administration over his order making masks optional in public schools, saying it violates the rights of students vulnerable to complications from COVID-19. The American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia (ACLU) said its suit in a federal court in Charlottesville seeks a temporary restraining order and permanent lifting of Youngkin's order barring school districts from implementing universal mask requirements. The ACLU said the order violates federal disabilities law.

<https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/virginia-governor-sued-again-over-order-make-masks-optional-schools-2022-02-02/>

Putin: 'Life goes on' despite 'difficult' COVID-19 situation

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday that "life goes on" despite a "difficult" COVID-19 situation in the country that has seen infection records for two weeks straight. The Kremlin continues to hold off from imposing nationwide restrictions even as the state coronavirus task force reported 141,883 new infections on Wednesday - a massive spike from the daily 15,000 cases recorded in early January. Putin appealed for "solidarity" and "mutual assistance" to help the country pull through the renewed surge. A subset of the omicron variant, BA.2, has been also discovered in Russia. The BA.2 subset is widely considered stealthier than the original version and some scientists worry it could also be more contagious. With only one six-week-long lockdown in 2020, Russia has avoided imposing nationwide COVID-19 restrictions on its citizens, leaving these decisions up to the local governments in its regions. Restrictions vary from region to region in Russia, ranging from working remotely to limiting access to certain public spaces.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-europe-russia-vladimir-putin-c6d353836d2c9046ceaa2a1ce3e49415>

Scientific Viewpoint

Covid will always be an epidemic virus — not an endemic one, scientist warns

Last week, the WHO warned that the next Covid variant will be even more contagious than omicron. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an epidemic occurs when the number of cases of a disease increases, often suddenly, above what is usually expected. The WHO declares a disease a pandemic when its growth is exponential and it is spreading globally.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/02/covid-will-never-become-an-endemic-virus-scientist-warns.html>

Study links childhood trauma to Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy

People who suffered trauma in childhood are more likely to be hesitant about having the Covid-19 vaccine, according to a study from Welsh researchers. The study used data from a telephone survey of 2,285 people aged 18 and over living in Wales between December 2020...

<https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/research-and-innovation/study-links-childhood-trauma-to-covid-19-vaccine-hesitancy-02-02-2022/>

Covid vaccine hesitancy could be linked to childhood trauma, research finds

Refusal or reluctance to have a Covid-19 vaccine may be linked to traumatic events in childhood, such as parents separating, neglect, or physical, verbal and sexual abuse, new research suggests. Those who suffer in childhood are also least likely to trust official NHS coronavirus information, follow the rules of restrictions or wear masks during the pandemic, public health experts found. Two years after the virus first reached the UK and a year after vaccines to protect against it were made available for free on the NHS, millions of people have yet to be vaccinated. Almost one in 10 people in the UK – 9% – have still not had a single dose.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/01/covid-vaccine-hesitancy-could-be-linked-childhood-trauma-research>

British trial deliberately infecting young adults with COVID found to be safe

The world's first "human challenge" trial in which volunteers were deliberately exposed to COVID-19 to advance research into the disease was found to be safe in healthy young adults, leaders of the study said on Wednesday. The data supports the safety of this model and lays the groundwork for future studies to test new vaccines and medicines against COVID-19 using this kind of trial by the end of this year, the team added. Open Orphan is running the project, launched last February, with Imperial College London, Britain's vaccines task force and Orphan's clinical company hVIVO.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/worlds-first-covid-human-challenge-trial-found-be-safe-young-adults-2022-02-02/>

Gilead's COVID-19 antiviral Veklury blew past sales estimates in late 2021 as omicron surged, vaccinations lagged

Just when it looked like Gilead's COVID-19 medicine Veklury was destined to be crowded out of the market by antibody treatments and antiviral pills, the omicron variant helped spark a surge in sales. In the fourth quarter of last year, with a late boost in demand in December, Veklury rang (PDF) up \$1.4 billion in sales, far exceeding the Wall Street consensus estimate of \$864 million. Gilead reported the figure Tuesday when it presented its fourth quarter and 2021 earnings. The strong quarter brought Veklury sales up to \$5.6 billion for the year and helped push Gilead's revenue figure to \$27.3 billion in 2021, an 11% increase from 2020 that the company attributed almost entirely to Veklury.

<https://www.fiercepharma.com/pharma/gilead-credits-veklury-s-strong-sales-to-omicron-s-surge-antiviral-pulled-1-4-billion-q4>

Omicron's sister variant spreads faster. So why did the one we call Omicron hit first?

Two years into a pandemic that turned us all into amateur virologists, we've learned that the best-spreading coronavirus variant will outcompete any slowpokes. But something curious happened with Omicron: The more transmissible version didn't take off first. The virus that the world came to know

as Omicron — and that ignited outbreaks in countries around the world — is just one lineage that made up the broader Omicron grouping. It's known officially as BA.1. For some time, its sister viruses, including one named BA.2, didn't seem to be doing much.

<https://www.statnews.com/2022/02/02/omicron-sister-variant-ba2-spreads-faster/>

Experts question unusual authorization plan for Covid vaccine for kids under 5

The Food and Drug Administration's willingness to consider authorizing a Covid-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech for children under the age of 5 — without evidence yet that it would be protective — is raising concerns among some vaccine experts who fear the plan could backfire and undermine vaccine uptake in this group. Pfizer and BioNTech confirmed Tuesday that they had been asked by the FDA to submit an application for the use of a two-dose vaccine in children 6 months to 4 years old. Data on a third shot would be submitted to regulators once they became available in the spring — ostensibly clearing the way for the agency to authorize a three-shot regimen for the youngest children who can get vaccinated. If the two-dose series is authorized by the FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, potentially sometime this month, parents who want to vaccinate children under 5 could begin to do so before Pfizer has proven that the va

<https://www.statnews.com/2022/02/02/worry-vaccinating-under-5-could-backfire/>

BARDA scopes market as it looks to partner next-generation COVID-19 vaccine developers

US government agency, BARDA, is drawing on industry feedback to assist it in understanding the advanced developmental landscape of next-generation COVID-19 vaccines.

<https://www.biopharma-reporter.com/Article/2022/02/01/BARDA-scopes-market-as-it-looks-to-partner-next-generation-COVID-19-vaccine-developers>

Coronavirus Resurgence

Turkey logs 24-hour record 110,682 COVID-19 cases -ministry

Turkey has recorded 110,682 new COVID-19 infections in the space of 24 hours, its highest daily figure of the pandemic, health ministry data showed on Wednesday. In late December, daily cases stood at about 20,000 but have since surged due to the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus. Data also showed 217 people died due to COVID-19 in the same 24-hour period. The total death toll stands at more than 87,000, according to the official tally. Separately, Turkey's coronavirus science council said the anti-viral pill molnupiravir will be administered to early-stage COVID-19 patients over age 65 or with chronic illnesses as of next week.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-logs-24-hour-record-110682-covid-19-cases-ministry-2022-02-02/>

Australia's COVID-19 hospital admissions fall to lowest in weeks

Australia's COVID-19 hospitalisation rate fell to its lowest in nearly three weeks on Wednesday, while a steady rate of daily infections raised hopes the worst of an outbreak fuelled by the Omicron coronavirus variant may have passed. Hospital cases fell to about 4,600 on Wednesday, with all states seeing a dip in admission numbers, after a peak of nearly 5,400 a week ago. "We've seen the peaks of Omicron, I think, come through in (New South Wales and Victoria)," Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who is under pressure over his handling of the Omicron wave, told a media briefing.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australias-covid-19-hospital-admissions-fall-lowest-weeks-2022-02-02/>

Omicron Sub-Variant May Cause New Surge of Infections in Current Wave

A sub-variant of the omicron coronavirus strain, known as BA.2, is spreading rapidly in South Africa and may cause a second surge of infections in the current wave, one of the country's top scientists said. BA.2 is causing concern as studies show that it appears to be more transmissible than the original omicron strain, the discovery of which was announced by South Africa and Botswana in

November. Research also shows that getting a mild infection with either of the two strains may not give a robust enough immune response to protect against another omicron infection. There's no indication that the sub-variant causes more severe disease from infection surges seen in Denmark and the U.K. The omicron wave of infections "may end up like a camel," Tulio de Oliveira, a bio-informatics professor who runs gene-sequencing institutions and advises the government on the pandemic, said at a presentation at Stellenbosch University on Wednesday. "A wave with another hump."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-02/omicron-s-ba-2-may-cause-infection-wave-hump-de-oliveira-says>

Tokyo's daily COVID-19 infections exceed 20000 for first time

New COVID-19 cases in Tokyo exceeded 20,000 for the first time on Wednesday, dimming hopes that a wave of infections fuelled by the Omicron variant is peaking in Japan. Nationwide cases reached a record 91,760, while 18 prefectures recorded all-time highs, according to a tally by online news service JX Press. Tokyo reported 21,576 new cases, surpassing the previous record of 17,631 in the Japanese capital on Friday. The closely watched usage rate of hospital beds reserved for COVID-19 patients edged up to 51.4%. Officials previously said that a state of emergency would be needed if the rate reached 50%, but now say the decision will depend on the number of serious cases and other factors.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/tokyos-daily-covid-19-infections-exceed-20000-first-time-2022-02-02/>

New Lockdown

Tonga goes into lockdown after tsunami aid brings COVID-19

The Pacific nation of Tonga has gone into lockdown following the discovery of two coronavirus infections in the community. The two cases are local port workers who had been helping to distribute aid received after a volcanic eruption and tsunami last month. The disaster polluted drinking water, severed communications, killed three people, and left dozens homeless.

<https://news.sky.com/story/tonga-goes-into-lockdown-after-tsunami-aid-brings-covid-19-12530784>