

REUTERS

S.Africa scraps isolation for those without COVID symptoms



Passengers queue to get a PCR test against COVID-19 before traveling on international flights, at O.R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg



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JOHANNESBURG (Reuters) - South Africans without symptoms of COVID-19 will no longer need to isolate or test if they have been in contact with a positive case, the government announced on Friday, saying developments around the virus justified a shift from containment measures towards mitigation.

The country has led the continent in terms of COVID-19 cases and deaths, as well as vaccinations, and its experience has been closely watched around the world after it was among the first countries to identify the more transmissible Omicron variant.

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COVID-19 no longer had to isolate but should monitor

for symptoms for 5-7 days and avoid attending large gatherings.

Only those people who developed symptoms needed to get tested, the statement continued, adding that those with mild symptoms should isolate for eight days and severe cases for 10 days.

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All quarantine in facilities outside the home would be stopped, it continued, while contact tracing efforts would also be scrapped aside from in specific scenarios such as cluster outbreaks.

The move was "based on advice from our scientists that it is not really having an impact anymore", deputy health minister Sibongiseni Dhlomo told local broadcaster SABC, adding it did not replace existing guidance on things like social distancing and mask wearing.

The department's statement said factors that influenced the move included: the emergence of highly infectious variants like Omicron; estimates that at least 60% of the population have some protection from vaccination or infection; and new information including on the high level of asymptomatic cases and small number of actual cases diagnosed.

Dhlomo said vaccination rates among the country's high risk populations were 66% in those over 60 years old and 63% in 50-59-year-olds.

Harry Moultrie, from the country's National Institute for Communicable Diseases, backed the changes.

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he said in a tweet.

In a Christmas Eve address, deputy president David Mabuza said the country had come a long way since the start of the pandemic.

"We have edged closer to reclaiming our normal lives and freedoms," he said, encouraging more people to get vaccinated.

South Africa remains in the lowest level of a five-tier lockdown system. While Omicron has driven a sharp rise in infections, these have not been accompanied by the increases in hospitalisations and deaths seen during previous waves.

On Thursday, the country reported 21,157 new COVID-19 infections, taking the total to 3.37 million since the start of the pandemic. It reported 75 new deaths.

Cases have already peaked in the country's commercial hub of Gauteng, the province of the country where Omicron was first detected, with infections also levelling out in three other provinces.

South Africa also began offering booster shots to the general public for the first time on Friday.

(Reporting by Emma Rumney; editing by Philippa Fletcher)

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