

More transmissible and deadly Delta variant surges in UK, threatens Europe and America

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The Delta variant of COVID-19 is exploding in the UK, in a surge which will soon overtake the rest of Europe.

Figures released yesterday by Public Health England (PHE) have torn apart the government's attempts to downplay the threat posed.

According to PHE, the Delta variant now accounts for 96 percent of new cases in the UK. It is roughly 60 percent more transmissible than the previous Alpha variant. The figure of 60 percent was confirmed by Professor Neil Ferguson and the Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis at Imperial College London: "That's firmed up. We think 60 percent is about the best estimate but ranging between 40 and 80 percent advantage."

In the last week, partially due to a faster genome sequencing method, confirmed cases of the variant increased by 240 percent, from 12,431 to 42,323.

PHE analysis also shows that the Delta variant is twice as likely to hospitalise people as the Alpha variant.

The virus's increased transmissibility is driving a surge in infections across the country. On Friday, 8,125 new COVID-19 cases were recorded, the highest total since February 26. More than 45,895 cases have been recorded in the last 7 days—a 58.1 percent increase on the week before.

According to the ZOE Covid Symptom Study App, run by King's College London, in reality there are an average of 11,908 cases a day, more than double the figure recorded by the study last week.

The government's advisers in the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) estimate that the reproduction (*R*) value is between 1.2 and 1.4 in the UK. Ferguson said on Thursday that the *R* for the UK ranged between 1.2 and 2.5 in different regions, with

1.5 the average.

PHE reports that the number of COVID-19 infections is doubling every 4.5 to 11.5 days in different parts of the country. Cases of COVID-19 are rising in every region of England, with the highest figures in the north-west where the infection rate is now 149.6 cases per 100,000—up from 89.4 last week. The region is home to five areas with the biggest week-on-week rises in the period up to June 6: Blackburn with Darwen (438.9 to 625.9), South Ribble (128.2 to 305.1), Burnley (135.0 to 303.6), Ribble Valley (149.5 to 310.4) and Salford (131.4 to 265.4).

One in 10 local areas in Britain are currently recording infection rates higher than 100 in 100,000.

Hospitalisations are beginning to rise along with infections. Nationally, the number has only climbed marginally in recent weeks to just above 1,000 but this obscures sharp rises in regions with the highest numbers of new cases. In the north-west, the number of patients in hospital with COVID-19 has increased from a low of 149 on May 16 to 271 on June 11. The number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care has increased from a low of 12 to 45 on June 6.

Vaccination undoubtedly offers substantial protection, but this is reduced by the Delta variant. After one dose, according to PHE analysis, vaccines are 15-20 percent less effective against symptomatic infection and there is a slight reduction even after two doses.

Of the 383 people in England admitted to hospital with the Delta variant between February and June 7, 251 were unvaccinated, 86 had received one dose of the jab and 42 both doses. Of the 42 who went on to die, 23 were unvaccinated, 7 had received one dose and 12 had received both.

Commenting on the risks of a third wave, Ferguson

explained that the modelling “is saying there is a risk of a substantial third wave, (but) we cannot be definitive about the scale of that—it could be substantially lower than the second wave or it could be of the same order of magnitude.”

He stressed that there was “still a lot of uncertainty” about how the virus would spread and how that would translate into hospitalisations. Deaths would “probably be lower” given the vaccinations, “but it still might be quite worrying.”

Such is the right-wing climate of intimidation against any doctors or scientists who suggests the need for stricter public health measures that this dangerous situation is being met with an absurd debate over whether and how long to delay “Freedom Day”, scheduled for June 21. The removal in just over a week of the last vestiges of public health restrictions would undoubtedly be disastrous. But cases are *already* rising exponentially under the current regime, with the economy already largely reopened, along with schools, colleges and universities.

What is necessary to bring the surge under control is to reinforce protective measures so that the vaccination programme can be safely completed, and proper border and test and trace protocols established. But the government is not interested in rising infections and their consequences. The only number that concerns them is the 2.3 percent growth in the UK economy in April brought by the reopening of shops and hospitality—the fastest increase since last July. This growth in profits is all they intend to protect, whatever the cost in human lives.

The same process is underway in Europe, where governments are using the fact that cases have dropped markedly, as a result of public health measures employed in the last few months, as an excuse to end those measures, in the face of the Delta variant.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 36 of Europe's 53 countries are currently easing restrictions.

This week, France allowed cafes and restaurants to serve indoors, museums and cinemas to increase capacity, gyms to open and pushed back a curfew from 9 to 11pm. Belgium and Italy limited their curfews and reopened indoor service at bars and restaurants. Germany fully reopened schools, scrapping measures like split classes and part-time teaching, and relieved

travel restrictions.

Just 35 percent of Europeans have been vaccinated and only 20 percent fully vaccinated. The Delta variant will therefore be able to spread through the population like wildfire, causing large numbers of hospitalisations and deaths. Clusters have already been reported in southwest France, and the new mutation officially makes up to 2.5 percent of cases in Germany.

The WHO's regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, warned this week that the variant was “poised to take hold in the region.” He explained, “We've been here before. Last summer, cases gradually rose in younger age groups, then moved into older age groups, leading to a devastating... loss of life in the autumn and winter of 2020. Let's not make that mistake again.” Vaccine coverage, he added, is still “far from sufficient to protect the region from a resurgence... many among vulnerable populations above the age of 60 remain unprotected.”

These warnings mean nothing to the European ruling class, who are putting intense pressure on the population to line up behind the policy of “learning to live with the virus.”

The dangers are even more advanced in America, where the Delta variant accounts for 6 percent of cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—six times the rate a month ago. In some western US states, Delta accounts for 18 percent of cases. While the percentage of the population fully vaccinated is roughly the same as in the UK, the US is 10 percentage points behind on first doses, with vaccination rates slowing.

The only perspective for the eradication of COVID-19 is that of a global struggle for socialism carried out by the working class, who must fight for effective restrictions to bring down infections and a fully resourced public health system to keep the virus suppressed.



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