

Moscow out of beds to treat COVID-19 patients as cases spike across the country

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Moscow officials are scrambling to repurpose thousands of hospital beds to handle a surge in COVID-19 patients. The deputy mayor revealed Tuesday that the capital city does not have enough spots available to treat even the current number of infected patients, much less should that coefficient rise. The infection rate in the metropolitan center of nearly 12 million people is triple the national average.

As of Friday morning, Russia had recorded another 23,128 infections over a 24-hour period, of which 6,893 were in the country's largest city. Ninety percent of the cases in Moscow are of the new, highly infectious Delta variant. There was an all-time record of 679 deaths in a single day. Children and adolescents are being increasingly affected. The Kremlin announced the release of a further 25 billion rubles, about \$347 million, to treat COVID-19 patients. The Ministry of Industry and Trade just called on metallurgical enterprises to share their oxygen supplies with hospitals.

The shortages hitting Moscow are being seen elsewhere in the country, with coronavirus cases ticking up in all of Russia's 80 regions. Several *oblasts* (provinces)—Voronezh, Kuzbass, Vladimirsky, and Tyumen—are reporting that their COVID-19 wards are at upwards of 80 percent capacity.

In Pskov, a city not far from the border with Estonia, the number of infections is up to what they were in February, when Russia was in the grip of its second wave. Outbreaks have hit a kindergarten, a factory and a hospital. In the far northern city of Severodvinsk, 53 incidents of COVID-19 have been reported in the last 24 hours, compared to just 276 in total since the onset of the pandemic. The majority of cases are among workers at nuclear shipbuilding plants.

Across Russia, including in the second largest

metropolitan center of Saint Petersburg, medical facilities are working to rapidly free up more beds as the Delta variant hits the country. A single case of Delta plus has now also been identified in Russia.

Following the lead of every major country, several months ago Russian officials ended virtually all mandated COVID-19 health measures. As a consequence of this, COVID-19 cases in Russia barely fell below the peaks witnessed in the first wave last spring. In early June they began to rapidly climb.

Speaking to Lenta.ru, Sergei Netesov, a leading biologist at one of the Novosibirsk State University's virology labs, made clear that government officials are to blame for the situation. "This year in Moscow everything was relaxed at the start of May. At first they announced a big vacation, and then suddenly people were allowed to go to stadiums, movie theaters, cafés, restaurants and so forth. There was no monitoring of mask wearing. Many acquaintances of mine went to Moscow. They were stunned that during the spring the city was living as if there was no epidemic," he said.

The situation in Moscow is now "awful," Netesov noted. "The hospitals are once again overwhelmed. Soon there will not be enough doctors to take care of all the sick. There already aren't enough beds. People are lying in corridors."

After failing to stem this latest surge by instituting a one-week paid holiday and imposing a number of minimal restrictions, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin declared last week that industries that serve the public, such as child care, transportation and food service, must vaccinate no less than 60 percent of their employees. All employers in the capital must shift no less than 30 percent of their employees to remote work.

Patrons at restaurants and cafes are also required to show proof of vaccination, or prior COVID-19

infection within the last six months or a negative PCR test. Masks and gloves are required in stores, on public transportation, and anywhere there are large concentrations of people. Concerned over waning immunities, revaccinations of those who already received one of Russia's four approved vaccines started this week.

Still, sporting events and entertainment venues are allowed to host up to 500 people. Workplaces and factories are open. And mirroring the position of the Kremlin and the political establishment around the globe, Sobyenin has made clear that he has no intention of reinstating a desperately needed lockdown.

The emphasis on vaccination as a means to control the situation in Moscow is occurring elsewhere in the country, with 23 regions announcing mandates for segments of the workforce and setting target dates to reach those goals for the late summer. Factories across the country, intent on keeping workers on the job, are following suit. The Saint Petersburg city government recently proposed a bill that will deny COVID-19 infection bonus payments, which range between 300,000 (about \$4,000) to 1 million rubles (about \$13,640), to unvaccinated medical personnel. With thousands of doctors and nurses having contracted the virus and dozens have died, it has provoked significant opposition.

Fear of the Delta variant and the push to vaccinate are starting to have an impact. In the last week, the number of people receiving a first dose has grown dramatically, with the government reporting a 170 percent nationwide increase in the vaccination rate last week. In the regions of Bashkiria, Khabarovsk, and Udmurtia, where that number jumped 55 percent in 10 days, injections had to be halted last weekend because of supply shortages.

However, given the authorities' refusal to impose lockdowns, the extremely low vaccination rate in Russia—just over 12 percent—and the time that it takes for vaccines to impart some degree of immunity, the current effort will do little to arrest the crisis soon.

The Putin government's attempt to bolster its position by being the first country to authorize a COVID-19 vaccine has been a flop. With Sputnik V approved before completing stage three trials, widespread distrust of the government existing more broadly in Russia, and officials repeatedly declaring the

COVID-19 situation under control for months, tens of millions have avoided getting the shot despite it being widely available.

At the current rate, it will take seven and a half months to vaccinate 70 percent of Russia's 144 million people. The Kremlin has made clear that it will not mandate vaccinations at the federal level.



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