

UK COVID cases pass 10 million: Health Secretary Javid warns of Omicron variant impact while rejecting containment measures

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The number of COVID-19 cases in the UK has passed 10 million since the start of the pandemic. Yesterday, Health Secretary Sajid Javid guaranteed that millions more cases will be recorded in the next months.

Javid addressed parliament to warn that the recently identified B.1.1.529 variant, now named Omicron by the World Health Organization (WHO), is of “huge international concern”, is likely more transmissible than Delta, “may pose substantial risk to public health”, and that vaccines “may be less effective against it”.

It was, he added, highly likely to have spread further than Botswana, where it was first discovered, and South Africa—two of six countries along with Lesotho, Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Namibia where flights to the UK have once again belatedly been banned as of midday yesterday.

Javid said there were no known cases yet in the UK, but precautions were being taken because current vaccines may be less effective, and because it may be more transmissible than other variants.

In fact, data from South Africa shows the mutation appears to be significantly more infectious than Delta. Javid is employing soporific phrases and proposing only the most minimal measures to justify the Johnson government’s policy of letting the virus rip through the population.

“One of the lessons of this pandemic has been that we must move quickly, and at the earliest possible moment,” he said. “We’re heading into winter and our booster programme is still ongoing, so we must act with caution.”

But when asked whether minimal public health measures such as mandatory masking in public places

and a return to social distancing would be reimposed, he made clear the government’s position. “The plan A, the policies that we put in place, they remain the policies that I think we need at this time.” The government’s entire pandemic response is based solely on vaccination, even though there is a massive question mark over the effectiveness of vaccines against the Omicron variant.

It is highly likely the variant is already in the UK. As of yesterday morning, there were only 100 cases of the variant confirmed in South Africa, and numerous others in Botswana. But South African healthcare professionals say it has likely spread throughout the country, is now the dominant strain and has spread more widely on the continent. Cases have already begun to spread globally, including two in Hong Kong, after a traveller returned from South Africa, one in Israel, of a traveller recently returned from Malawi, and two more suspected cases in Israel.

After Javid’s appearance in the House of Commons, it was confirmed the variant has hit Europe, with Belgian officials saying they had detected a case in an unvaccinated woman who had returned from Egypt on November 11. She first experienced symptoms on Monday November 22, according to reports.

Up until yesterday afternoon, between 500 and 700 people were flying into the UK from South Africa every day, walking through customs and getting into taxis, buses and trains, meaning thousands of potential infections. Thanks to the Tories’ ending of all measures of containment, anyone unknowingly infected with the new variant may already have come into contact with hundreds of other people. Anyone who has arrived in the UK from South Africa in the past 10 days

is only being required to take a PCR test on day two and day eight, and to isolate at home along with the rest of the household. Flights from the six countries resume on Sunday, with the caveat that arrivals must enter hotel quarantine.

Information available to date about the new variant is chilling. South Africa's surge has seen cases double in just two weeks, with fears the new variant accounts for most of them.

The variant has multiple mutations that might help it evade the body's immune response, thwart vaccines and make it more transmissible. Along with 45 amino acid changes there are over 30 changes in the spike protein of the virus. A senior scientist said, "One of our major worries is this virus spike protein is so dramatically different to the virus spike that was in the original Wuhan strain, and therefore in our vaccines..."

The spike protein is targeted by most vaccines because it is the mechanism through which the virus gains access to the body's cells.

Professor Christina Pagel from University College London said, "We don't have definitive evidence on transmission advantage or immune escape, but we have plenty of cause to suspect both."

Dr Tom Peacock, a virologist at Imperial College London, said the variant could be "of real concern" because of its "horrific spike profile".

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Contrary to government and media lies, the UK is already heading towards a massive escalation of the pandemic and is not "bucking the European trend" at all.

Today the UK reported 50,091 cases and 160 deaths, compared to 47,240 infections and 147 fatalities reported Thursday.

Daily cases have been above 25,000 since Johnson's Freedom Day on July 19, when almost all mitigation measures were dropped in workplaces, public transport and social settings, after which children were sent back to school in September. Cases reached a high of 51,484 October 20, before falling back to 29,843 on November

6. They have since begun to climb inexorably and are now just below their previous post-Freedom Day peak.

Prior to yesterday's dramatic rise, COVID cases had jumped by 74 percent in a week.

One reason for the increase was the spread of the AY.4.2 variant of Delta, accounting for 15 percent of UK cases. It was only designated a "variant under investigation" on October 20 and is thought to be up to 10 percent more infectious than the original Delta variant first detected in India in late 2020. Delta was around 60 percent more transmissible than Alpha. It is one of nine known versions of Delta present in the UK.

The higher infectivity of the Omicron variant is not yet known conclusively, but initial estimates are that it is six times more transmissible than the original Alpha variant and twice as transmissible as the Delta variant.

In the face of this threat, not only the Johnson government but the Labour opposition and the trade unions are guilty of premeditated mass murder for their shared insistence that vaccination alone or a few paltry additional measures is enough to curb the pandemic. They intend to build on the mountain of 167,000 corpses left by the pandemic and the tens of thousands left incapacitated by Long COVID.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers and young people to take up the struggle for a policy of elimination, including the immediate closure of all education institutions and non-essential workplaces with full support for those affected. The full array of public health measures must be deployed including compulsory masking, air filtration systems, social distancing and other proven mitigation measures. We appeal to all those wishing to see an end to the pandemic and who want justice for its victims to contact us today to take part in preparing the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 pandemic.



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