# China experiences surge in COVID-19 cases after relaxing travel and quarantine policies

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In the past six weeks, China has experienced significant outbreaks of COVID-19 in several cities and tourist areas throughout the country. On Wednesday, China's National Health Commission (NHC) reported 114 new domestic symptomatic infections and 512 asymptomatic infections throughout the country, with both figures down significantly from just a few weeks ago.

Since the beginning of July, when Shanghai began to relax restrictions that prevent the spread of COVID-19, there have been a number of outbreaks of the highly infectious BA.5.2 Omicron subvariant in the city and in other metropolitan areas.

In mid-July, the NHC announced that the Zero-COVID strategy had entered a new stage, gradually becoming less stringent. The most significant policy change was a reduction in quarantine time for people arriving from high risk areas and international arrivals from 14 days to 7 days. There were also adjustments in the definition of medium and high risk areas to allow for quicker reopening and shorter lockdowns.

NHC officials have stated that the more relaxed plan is meant to keep infections down as close to zero as possible, while minimizing disruption to the general population and the economy. The shorter isolation times were also adjusted to meet the characteristics of the Omicron variant, which has a shorter incubation period than prior variants.

On August 31, the General Administration of Customs removed the requirement for visitors to report their nucleic acid test results, their infection status and vaccination records. Predictably, after these new less stringent protocols began to be enforced, every province in China has had some degree of outbreak.

On July 6, in Xi'an, Shaanxi, a small number of BA.5.2 cases were discovered which led to a seven-day "silent period" rather than a fully implemented citywide lockdown. Crowded indoor recreational venues were temporarily closed, in-person dining was shut down, summer vacation for schools began early, and large organized gatherings were postponed. This same strategy was repeated on July 11 in the northwestern city of Lanzhou, Gansu, after new cases were reported.

Tourist areas such as the island province of Hainan have seen outbreaks that have led to the shutdown of large areas. On August 8, the province reported 1,400 locally transmitted cases since the beginning of the month. By contrast, in 2021 there were only two cases reported for the whole year. Tibet also had a flare-up of COVID-19 cases in the month of August, leading to a rollout of mass testing and the closure of the famous Potala Palace and other religious and entertainment destinations. Yiwu, Urumqi, Dunhuang and several cities in Tibet and inner Mongolia experienced surges of infections in August.

In most cases visitors were required to submit two negative test results, 24 hours apart, in order to leave the area. In some cases there were limited lockdowns, termed "static management," that lasted from 24 hours to 5 days.

On September 1, the metropolitan city of Chengdu, with a population of 21 million, went into a state of full lockdown after the discovery of an outbreak. The city discovered a total of 1,175 symptomatic cases and 508 asymptomatic cases in the period between August 11 and September 6.

The lockdown of Chengdu, which ended on Monday, was the largest since the two-month Shanghai lockdown that began in April this year. Certain restrictions on daily life still remain. Throughout Chengdu residents need to provide negative nucleic acid test results from within the past 72 hours to use public transit or enter public venues. To deal with the need for testing, five separate air-inflated testing facilities have been built in the city with a capacity to deliver 250,000 tests each day.

Each of the recent outbreaks have largely been suppressed through the continuation of the Zero-COVID

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elimination strategy, which includes lockdowns, rigorous contact tracing, the safe isolation of infected individuals, mass testing and universal mask-wearing.

China's adherence to a Zero-COVID elimination strategy continues to have positive results for protecting the population. However, without a globally coordinated elimination strategy, infections and outbreaks will continue to be imported into the country to spread and threaten public health, and pressures will continue to mount for China to completely end Zero COVID.

In addition to relying on mass testing, localized lockdowns, static management and silent periods, there have been new developments on the treatment and vaccination front. On July 25, the National Medical Products Administration (NMPA) approved the use of Azvudine for the treatment of COVID-19 symptoms.

Azvudine was developed in 2021 to treat HIV-1 infection and was approved for use on COVID-19 patients in a fast-tracked process that in total only took two weeks. It is less effective than the antiviral Paxlovid, which is also authorized to treat patients, but is much more affordable. Also, in an effort to make Paxlovid more widely available, Chinese drug company Zhejiang Huahai Pharmaceutical entered into a partnership with Pfizer to manufacture the antiviral in China. The non-exclusive partnership will produce the pills over the next five years.

There is also a promising new mucosal vaccine that has just been developed in China and approved for the public. It is an inhaled treatment that is proving to be effective against Omicron variants. Its release was announced by maker CanSino Biologics on Sunday, September 4.

During the recent lockdowns, there has been a relative increase of public criticism toward the Zero-COVID policy on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. Discredited rumors that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime will make Zero COVID a permanent and ubiquitous government policy, requiring regular mass testing even when there are no outbreaks, have been refuted by NHC officials.

On October 16, the CCP will begin its 20th National Congress, which take place every five years. It remains to be seen what decisions will be made at the congress regarding the continuation of Zero COVID, but the urgency with which Azvudine was approved as a treatment and the relaxation of certain policies indicates a nervousness about continuing lockdowns and a move toward reliance on the new treatments and vaccines. The effect of lockdowns on the economy and tourism, as well as pressures from every other capitalist government to "live with COVID" are becoming evident in the final month before the congress.

The numbers of cases, severe cases, hospitalizations and deaths in China, home to 1.4 billion people, is minuscule when compared to anywhere else in the world. There has not been a single reported death from COVID-19 in China since May 27, while the total number of recorded deaths in the country stands at just 5,226.

By comparison, according to News Nodes the United States has had over 1,056,962 official COVID-19 deaths, while estimates of excess deaths place the real toll above 1.2 million. The current seven-day average of daily new deaths stands at 407, and there are growing warnings that another major surge will take place this fall and winter. Across Europe, nearly 2 million people have officially died from COVID-19. Estimates of global excess deaths outside China stand at roughly 22 million, according to *The Economist*.

These figures show how effective the Zero-COVID strategy has been, and make clear that it must be implemented everywhere in the world. If China were to drop its mitigation measures and pursue a vaccine- and treatment-only approach, as advocated relentlessly by the Western media, it would likely lead to the deaths of millions of people.

Even though vaccination rates in China are relatively high compared to that of the United States (89.7 percent of the population have had two or more shots in China, compared to 66.8 percent in the US) the constant flare-ups of cases in China prove that a vaccine-only strategy is not enough. On the other hand, if the same rigorous measures implemented in China were practiced the world over, the human race could eliminate SARS COV-2 globally in a matter of months.

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