

Swiss shut up shops due to virus variant fears

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Switzerland announced Wednesday it was imposing new restrictions aimed at "drastically" reducing contact between people, fearing a rapid upsurge in COVID-19 cases due to new variants of the coronavirus.

The Swiss had been expected simply to extend the closure of bars and restaurants until the end of February.

But the government went much further, imposing mandatory working from home and closing shops other than those selling basic provisions.

"The number of infections is stagnating at a very high level and the risk of a rapid upsurge is real with the new, much more contagious variants of the virus," the government said in a statement.

It said given the "tense epidemiological situation", it had decided to take new measures that went beyond simply carrying on the with the current restrictions.

"On the one hand, it extended the measures adopted in December by five weeks: restaurants, cultural establishments, sports and leisure facilities will remain closed until the end of February.

It also decided to take new measures to drastically reduce contacts.

"From Monday, working from home will become compulsory, stores that do not sell everyday goods will have to close, private demonstrations and gatherings will be subject to further restrictions and the protection of vulnerable people in the workplace will be strengthened."

Variants spreading domestically

Switzerland's pandemic restrictions have generally not been as strict as in other European countries.

Switzerland was the first country in western continental Europe to start its COVID-19 vaccination campaign, doing so on December 23 with the Pfizer-BioNTech jab.

It also gave the green light Tuesday to the Moderna vaccine, which, regulators said, could be administered immediately.

The country of 8.6 million people has seen [coronavirus](#) infections gradually decrease from a spike in early November.

Around 485,000 people have tested positive for the virus, while more than 7,750 people have died.

Patrick Mathys, the [health ministry](#)'s crisis management chief, told a press conference Tuesday that Switzerland's infection rates were still troubling despite decreases in deaths and hospitalisations.

He voiced concern about the spread of new, seemingly more contagious variants of the virus first detected in Britain and South Africa.

Some 127 such cases have been found so far in Switzerland—and rather than just being imported cases, the strains are now spreading domestically, he said.

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