

WAVE WILL ONLY END 'WHEN EVERYONE WHO CAN, GETS INFECTED'

Up to a third of Israelis predicted to get COVID in next 3 weeks; tests running out

PM says government trying to find solutions amid huge lines at testing sites, while some health officials say Omicron herd immunity is likeliest outcome of current wave



People shop at the Mahane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem on December 24, 2021. (Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90)

A leading health expert advising the government predicted Sunday morning that one out of every three or four Israelis will be infected with the Omicron variant of the coronavirus over the next three weeks, cautioning that most won't know they've been infected because the country is quickly running out of test kits.

Testing facilities across the country were inundated with huge crowds on Sunday as thousands of Israelis lined up on foot or in cars to get tested, with many waiting hours to be swabbed.

Health Ministry figures published Sunday morning showed that 4,197 new cases were confirmed on Saturday, a figure representing reduced testing on weekends, with the rate of positive tests rising to 4.57 percent. Daily infections in Israel have spiked from under 1,000 new cases some 10 days ago to almost 5,500 on Friday, and active cases have almost tripled in a week to 31,958. The total confirmed infections since the start of the pandemic stand at close to 1.4 million.

However, serious cases have seen a far more moderate increase, from 77 on December 22 to 110 on Sunday. The death toll remained at 8,244. There have been four COVID-related deaths in the country since December 21.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said Sunday at the outset of the weekly cabinet meeting that there will soon be tens of thousands of daily infections. He hailed far-reaching travel restrictions imposed in recent weeks, saying they delayed Omicron's arrival and enabled Israel to study the outbreaks in South Africa, Britain, the United States and other places, effectively "seeing into the future."

"Our goal is always the same goal: to enable the economy to function as fully as possible, while protecting the most vulnerable among us," Bennett said, adding that the government was discussing potential solutions to the heavy strain on testing sites and reported shortage of testing kits.

Bennett suggested that Israel may need to change the criterion for who can be tested due to the shortage of testing kits, a phenomenon he said was being experienced worldwide.

In an official report handed to the coronavirus cabinet and in a series of media interviews, Prof. Eran Segal of the Weizmann Institute estimated that 2-4 million out of Israel's total population of some 9.5 million will end up

catching Omicron, but the number of simultaneous serious cases won't surpass the current record of approximately 1,200.



Prime Minister Naftali Bennett leads a cabinet meeting at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem on December 19, 2021. (Emil Salman/Pool/Flash90)

Segal urged Israelis who haven't received their booster vaccines to get them, retweeting new British data showing that the third shot increased the protection against Omicron hospitalization from 52 percent to 88%.

Speaking to Army Radio, Segal said that "from a certain stage — 20,000 or 30,000 infections per day — we will become oblivious to the numbers because we don't have enough tests. The test apparatus is already collapsing."

"What will happen, like what is happening all over the world, is that the restrictions that somewhat worked [against other variants] will simply be ineffective against Omicron, and the stop will only come when almost everyone who could get infected gets infected," he told Ynet, predicting that would take around three weeks before numbers start to drop.

Though he didn't mention the term "herd immunity," the prediction appeared to fall in line with the [remark earlier Sunday](#) by Health Ministry director-general Nachman Ash that Israel could reach herd immunity, though at the cost of very many infections.



Eran Segal (courtesy of Eran Segal)

The logic is that those infected with Omicron are the most protected against getting the strain again, and if a big enough percentage of the population has that protection, it will lead to the end of the outbreak — at least until a new variant starts spreading or until that immunity wanes over time.

The model is similar to the policy adopted by Sweden in the early stages of the pandemic, aiming to keep the economy open while keeping vulnerable populations in isolation. While that led to excess deaths and was abandoned by Stockholm, experts are increasingly saying the policy could work better now that we have vaccines and the milder though far more infectious Omicron.

Meanwhile, experts from the Gertner Institute and the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology presented several scenarios to Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, Health Ministry officials and hospital managers, the most extreme of which had 99% of Israel's population catching Omicron.

Even in such a scenario — which would require the R reproduction number — which currently stands at 1.84 — to reach 3, the number of serious cases wasn't predicted to similarly surge. In an optimistic prediction, there would be 1,250-1,750 serious patients — only slightly over the current record — and a more pessimistic scenario would see 2,000-2,750 such cases, putting immense strain on the health system.

Hospitals have sounded the alarm, saying that while in previous waves the system managed to deal with 1,200 simultaneous serious cases, this time staff is already strained due to an existing outbreak of the flu and a growing number of staff members in quarantine.