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Bennett: 'Omicron Is Here, the Fifth Wave Has Begun'

Israel is slated to expand its list of 'red countries' to include the U.S. and Canada on Sunday, as the number of omicron cases climbs to 175

Jonathan Lis Dec. 19, 2021 8:19 PM [🔔 Follow](#)



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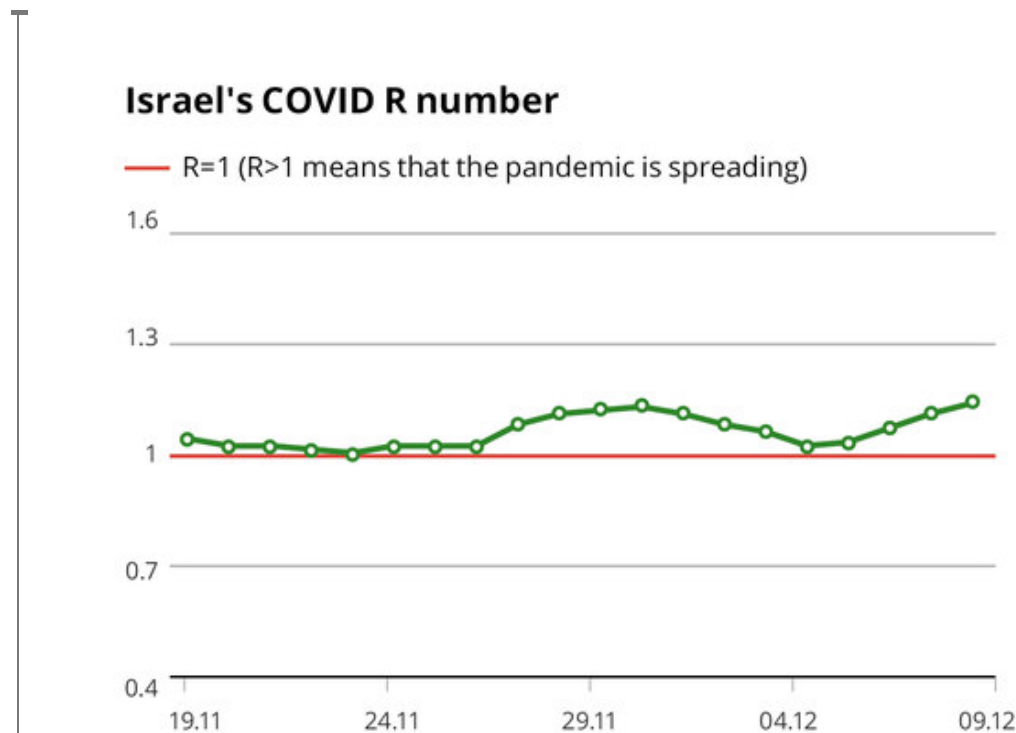
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Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, today. Credit: Yonatan Sindel/Flash90

"Omicron is already in Israel and it is spreading fast...The fifth wave has begun," said Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in a nationwide address Sunday, as cases of the variant continue to climb.

The way to curb the rate of infection and "buy more time" to prepare for the variant's spread "is to vaccinate children in Israel as fast as possible," Bennett said. He noted the very low immunization rates among children, relatively stagnant since vaccines for five- to 11-year-olds were approved, urging parents to vaccinate their children. "Every hour you wait with it is an unnecessary hour."



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"The children's vaccine is safe, and it is the responsibility of the parents," Bennett said.

"A parent who has been vaccinated three times also needs to protect his children. Don't leave your children exposed and vulnerable to the coming omicron," he added.

Until Israel announces its next set of restrictions, Bennett urged Israelis to avoid public gatherings and be vigilant about mask-wearing. He also called on employers in the private sector to switch to remote work in order to avoid COVID infection.

"The goal is to cross this wave while continuing the activity of the economy as much as we can," the Prime Minister added.

Israel is also expected to add the U.S., Canada, Portugal, Italy, Turkey, Germany, Hungary, Morocco, Switzerland and Belgium to its so-called red list of high-risk destinations, effectively barring Israelis from visiting.

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- Omicron COVID strain spreading significantly faster than delta, says WHO
- Israel bought time against omicron, but is shooting itself in the foot

Recommended by the Health Ministry, the ban is expected to take effect on December 22, subject to approval by a Knesset committee.

On Sunday, Israel identified 40 new omicron cases, taking the total cases of the variant to 175.

Travel to and from so-called "red countries" is expressly

forbidden, unless permission is granted by a special committee.

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The "red" designation of France, Spain, United Arab Emirates, Ireland, Norway, Finland and Sweden will go into effect on Sunday at midnight.

In response to the government decision to expand its list of "red countries," Defense Minister Benny Gantz announced Sunday that two new government-run COVID hotels would be opened to accommodate the influx of travelers.

Bennett's government is currently advancing a law to charge people to check in to COVID hotels, shifting the cost of the hotel stay away from the government, which has already spent half a billion shekels on them since the pandemic's outbreak.

Assessments presented to Bennett on Saturday predicted that the number of omicron cases in Israel will reach 400 to 600 over the next week, in light of the number of cases that cannot be traced back to people who traveled abroad.

Of the 175 omicron cases already identified, 53 carriers were unvaccinated by Israel's standards, while 122 were fully immunized. The status of one case is still unknown.

Health officials highly suspect another 380 coronavirus patients are infected with the omicron strain.

The prime minister has requested that officials expand the public information campaign promoting vaccines, with a

particular emphasis on children aged five to 11.

Israel's coronavirus R number, reflecting the rate of infection, rose to 1.14 on Sunday, indicating that the virus is spreading. The number reflects data from 10 days prior, and rose from 1.07 and 1.03 on the previous days.

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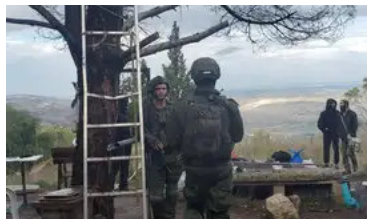
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