

Germany's Merkel points to variant risk as infections drop

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel sits in a car, leaving the Federal Press Conference building after a press conference on the current situation in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2021. Topics included the decisions of the federal and state governments to combat the Corona pandemic, the Chancellor's upcoming virtual consultations with the heads of state and government of the European Union (EU), and relations with the United States following the inauguration of the new president. (Bernd von Jutrczenka/dpa via AP)

Germany is seeing a promising decline in new coronavirus infections, but must take "very seriously" the risk posed by a more contagious variant and will have to be cautious whenever it starts easing its lockdown, Chancellor Angela Merkel said Thursday.

Merkel and Germany's 16 state governors on Tuesday decided to extend the country's [lockdown](#) by two weeks until Feb. 14 and tighten some measures, for example requiring [surgical masks](#)—rather than just fabric face coverings—in shops and on public transportation.

On Thursday, Germany's disease control center said that 20,398 new cases were reported over the past 24 hours, nearly 5,000 fewer than a week ago. The number of new cases per 100,000

residents over seven days stood at 119, the lowest since the beginning of November—though still well above the level of 50 the government is targeting. There were 1,013 more deaths, bringing Germany's total so far to 49,783.

The new variant, which has been detected in Germany and many other European countries, isn't yet dominant there, but "we must take the danger from this mutation very seriously," Merkel told reporters.

"We must slow the spread of this mutation as far as possible, and that means ... we must not wait until the danger is more tangible here," she said. "Then it would be too late to prevent a third wave of the pandemic, and possibly an even heavier one than before. We can still prevent this."



German Chancellor Angela Merkel arrives wearing a protective mask for a press conference on the current situation in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2021. Topics include the decisions taken by the federal and state governments to combat the Corona pandemic, the Chancellor's upcoming virtual consultations with the heads of state and government of the European Union (EU), and relations with the United States following the inauguration of the new president. (Michael Kappeler/Pool via AP)

Merkel said that Germany won't be able to open up everything at once whenever the lockdown ends, declaring that schools must open first.

"We must be very careful that we do not see what happens in many countries: they do a hard lockdown, they open, they open too much, and then they have the result that they are back in exponential growth very quickly," she said. She pointed to Britain's experience in December, when the new variant took hold.

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