

# 12 Countries Roll Back COVID Restrictions, Israel Scraps ‘Green Pass’

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*Sweden and Switzerland joined Denmark, Norway, Finland, Ireland, The Netherlands, Italy, Lithuania, France and the UK in announcing they will lift COVID restrictions and open up their countries.*

Europe is accelerating steps to [roll back COVID restrictions](#) as efforts to control the spread of the virus have failed and countries downgrade the threat posed by SARS-CoV-2.

Sweden and Switzerland joined Denmark, Norway, Finland, Ireland, [The Netherlands](#), Italy, Lithuania, France and the UK in announcing they will [lift COVID restrictions](#) and open up their countries.

Top Israeli officials also [announced](#) this week they are abolishing the country’s “[Green Pass](#)” COVID vaccine passport for restaurants, hotels, gyms and theaters.

The policy update will take effect Feb. 6, **Prime Minister Naftali Bennet**’s government said, pending [approval](#) by a parliamentary committee. Israel’s proof-of-vaccination policy will remain in effect for events such as parties or weddings.

“To continue the green pass in the same way can create false assurances,” said [Nadav Davidovitch](#), an epidemiologist and public health physician advising Prime Minister Naftali Bennet’s government. “It’s not reducing infections in closed spaces like theatres. It needs to be used mainly for high-risk places like hospitals, elderly care homes, or events when you are eating and singing and dancing.”

Sweden will [lift all COVID restrictions](#) by Feb. 9, the Swedish government said today.

According to [Politico](#), the Swedish Public Health Agency said it reassessed COVID as “not being socially critical” due to a better understanding of the [Omicron variant](#), which is milder and associated with fewer hospitalizations.

“It’s time to open up Sweden,” said **Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson**. “The pandemic isn’t over, but it is moving into a new phase.”

The decision to open Sweden came a day after Switzerland, citing high immunity levels and the milder [Omicron](#) variant, [announced](#) it will abolish mandatory work-from-home and the quarantine rules beginning today.

The government also will lift health measures at the borders and tourists will no longer need to receive Swiss COVID certificates.

The Swiss government said it planned to phase out other restrictions after consulting with 26 cantons, employers, trade unions and parliamentary committees.

In two weeks, the government will determine the next steps to relax pandemic measures depending on the health situation, according to an [official statement](#).

Options include a staggered exit strategy or an abrupt end to all COVID measures on Feb. 17.

### **Denmark to classify COVID as endemic disease**

Just days before Sweden and Switzerland’s announcements, Denmark [became the first country](#) in the European Union to lift all COVID restrictions, [reclassifying COVID](#) as an endemic disease.

Danish **Health Minister Magnus Heunicke** on Feb. 1 wrote a letter to the parliament’s epidemiology committee stating COVID was no longer a “socially critical disease.”

Based on the recommendations of the committee, the government decided to scrap COVID restrictions.

The “rules will lapse when the illness will no longer be categorized as ‘socially critical’ on 1 February 2022,” Heunicke [wrote](#).

The [classification of a disease](#) as “socially critical” gave the government authority to implement broad restrictive measures such as shutting businesses and making mask-wearing mandatory.

An [endemic disease](#) circulates freely but is recognized as posing less of a threat to societies.

“No one can know what will happen next December,” Heunicke [told CNN](#) on Monday. “But we promised the citizens of Denmark that we will only have restrictions if they are truly necessary and we’ll lift them as soon as we can. That’s what’s happening right now.”

When asked about vaccine mandates, Heunicke said:

“Luckily we don’t need that in Denmark ... I’m really happy that we don’t need it because it’s a very troubling path to move that way.”

**Søren Brostrøm**, director-general of Denmark’s Health Authority agreed:

“I do not believe in imposed vaccine mandates. It’s a pharmaceutical intervention with possible side effects. You need as an authority, to recognize that. I think if you push too much, you will have a reaction — action generates reaction, especially with vaccines.”

Danish authorities will still recommend taking at-home tests when coming into contact with large groups of people and will make PCR tests available to the public. Travelers entering the country will still be tested upon entry.

### **Other European Companies drop COVID restrictions**

Italy, France, Norway, Lithuania, England and Finland also relaxed restrictions, [Bloomberg reported](#).

“We should discuss whether it’s time for us to take a different viewpoint and start unwinding restrictions even with a high number of infections,” Finnish **Prime Minister Sanna Marin** told reporters. “I hope that we can be rid of restrictions during February.”

At a meeting in Helsinki to discuss the pace of removing restrictions, the government decided to lift all limits on gatherings and ease restrictions on restaurants and bars on Feb. 14. Night clubs will remain closed until March 1. Cultural venues, events and sports will be free from restrictions.

Italian **Prime Minister Mario Draghi**’s administration met Wednesday to discuss how to curb restrictions. The government will initially focus on quarantine rules for children and plans to cut the 10-day isolation requirement down to five.

France on Wednesday ended mandatory work-from-home rules, eliminated requirements on face masks outdoors and lifted attendance restrictions at stadiums and theaters. However the country’s vaccine pass will remain in place until hospitals are able to function normally without canceling non-emergency procedures to make room for COVID patients in intensive care, **Health Minister Olivier Veran** [said](#) on Wednesday.

Asked whether France would require a second booster shot, Veran said it would depend on whether there were further mutations of the virus.

The Lithuanian government is [dropping its requirement](#) to present a vaccination certificate in public areas, such as restaurants and sporting events, and unvaccinated workers will no longer be required to undergo weekly testing.

Norway followed suit and lifted restrictions on private gatherings, bars and restaurants and will not require border testing.

England last week [announced](#) it was lifting its COVID restrictions. Beginning Jan. 27, face coverings were no longer required by law anywhere in England and the legal requirement for COVID passes to enter large venues and clubs were scrapped.

The government also dropped guidance for face-covering in classrooms, advice for people working from home and restrictions for nursing home visitors.

On Jan. 26, the Netherlands reopened restaurants, bars, museums and theaters as part of a broader easing of restrictions.

## Lockdowns had little-to-no benefit on public health, analysis shows

Few studies, if any, have been carried out to determine [whether vaccine passports](#) and COVID restrictions actually lowered COVID cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

However, a [recent analysis](#) published by researchers at Johns Hopkins found COVID lockdown measures implemented in the U.S. and Europe had almost no effect on public health.

“We find little-to-no evidence that mandated lockdowns in Europe and the United States had a noticeable effect on COVID-19 mortality rates,” the [researchers wrote](#).

The researchers also examined shelter-in-place orders, finding they reduced COVID mortality only by 2.9%.

Studies assessing only shelter-in-place orders found a mortality reduction of 5.1%, but when combined with other lockdown measures, shelter-in-place orders actually increased COVID mortality by 2.8%.

Researchers found limits on gatherings may have actually increased COVID mortality. They wrote:

“[Shelter-in-place orders] may isolate an infected person at home with his/her family where he/she risks infecting family members with a higher viral load, causing more severe illness. But often, lockdowns have limited people’s access to safe (outdoor) places such as beaches, parks and zoos, or included outdoor mask mandates or strict outdoor gathering restrictions, pushing people to meet at less safe (indoor) places.”

COVID lockdown measures also contributed to “reducing economic activity, rising unemployment, reducing schooling, causing political unrest, contributing to domestic violence and undermining liberal democracy,” the report said.

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