



London

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;373:n1617<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1617>

Published: 23 June 2021

Covid-19: Israel advises against foreign travel after recording 125 new cases

Michael Day

Israel's new prime minister, Naftali Bennett, is reconvening the coronavirus cabinet and has urged Israelis to avoid non-urgent foreign travel after 125 people tested positive for coronavirus on 21 June, most with the delta variant probably caught abroad.

Of the 125 cases 78 were children, and about a third had received both doses of the Pfizer vaccine. The Ministry of Health said that most of the cases were recorded in the towns of Modiin and Binyamina.

The news prompted the Israeli government to announce new containment measures.

Speaking on a tour of Ben Gurion International Airport with the health minister Nitzan Horowitz, Bennett said that from 22 June all passengers would have to take a PCR test before leaving the airport. Israel will increase the number of testing sites at the airport from 30 to 70.

"Unfortunately, we are seeing the beginning of a virus spread within the State of Israel," said Bennett. "I want to ask everyone, anyone who is not compelled to go abroad, that they not go abroad."

He added that face coverings would again become mandatory within the airport, and he encouraged Israelis to resume wearing them indoors despite the government having lifted this requirement last week.

Avoiding hotspots

The success of Israel's vaccination programme has seen infections plummet from a peak of more than 10 000 daily cases in January to just single figures this month. The country has since dropped nearly all of its social distancing restrictions, although its borders remain largely closed to tourists.

But although 75% of Israel's over 16s have received the Pfizer vaccine, only 2-4% of 12-15 year olds have been vaccinated since their age group became eligible this month, health ministry data have shown. Hezi Levi, the ministry's director general, said that this meant the population was not fully protected because herd immunity had not yet kicked in and that the uptick of covid-19 cases was a cause for concern.

Ran Balicer, head of Israel's covid advisory panel, said that the rise in cases was not surprising and that no severe covid cases had been reported among the people infected.

Nonetheless, Israeli travellers are now required to sign a declaration stating that they will not enter countries designated as virus hotspots, including Russia, India, South Africa, Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. The Ministry of Health has authorised officials to impose quarantine on vaccinated Israelis travelling from high risk countries.

Bennett, who heads a left-right coalition that forced Benjamin Netanyahu from power this month, said that ministers would announce further containment measures in the coming days.

Benny Gantz, defence minister, said, "The war on coronavirus is not behind us, but with determined and rapid action we will maintain a low level of infection and we will win this fight as well."