



South Korea

Vaccinations' slow start, eased social distancing rules likely to raise COVID-19-related uncertainty

 OPERATIONAL

COVID-19

South Korea is due to start its COVID-19 vaccination campaign on 26 February.

South Korea has secured enough doses for its population, but the campaign is likely to have a slow start due to vaccine efficacy concerns and foreign vaccine makers' production issues.

The government in February has relaxed social distancing restrictions and in March will further reduce compulsory requirements; this will reduce operational risks for businesses, especially small enterprises.

A delayed vaccination campaign and easing of social distancing rules are likely to increase COVID-19-related uncertainties in the coming months, until South Korea reaches herd immunity.

Slow start

The government on 10 February granted its first approval for a COVID-19 vaccine to AstraZeneca. Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun on 16 February said that South Korea has secured enough vaccines for 79m people, significantly more than its population of about 52m. As it prepares to embark on its vaccination campaign, the government aims to "sufficiently tame" the virus by November.

However, South Korea's vaccination campaign already lags many other countries and is likely to proceed slowly in the next three months. Due to its contracts with foreign vaccine suppliers and strong global competition for vaccines, South Korea will receive doses in phases and distribute most vaccines in the second half of 2021. Efficacy concerns and delays in vaccine production have already compelled the government to lower its vaccination target for the first quarter of 2021 from 1.3m to less than 760,000. Although 87% of the respondents in a November 2020 poll said that they were "certain" or "likely" to get vaccinated, a January survey showed that only 14% of respondents are willing to be vaccinated "immediately".

Making it voluntary

Meanwhile, the government is relaxing its [social distancing rules](#) to deal with "public fatigue" and to address rising complaints from local businesses such as restaurants and gyms. The country is showing signs of recovery from the [third wave](#) of COVID-19 cases (which began in November 2020) and the number of daily infections has come under 800 again in recent weeks.

Consequently, the government on 15 February allowed higher-risk businesses (such as cafes) in the metropolitan area of the capital Seoul to operate for longer hours and lowered the level of social distancing rules in other regions as well. President Moon Jae-in on 15 February also announced that his government will introduce new social distancing rules in March to minimise compulsory measures and encourage voluntary uptake. This change is likely aimed at reducing operational and regulatory challenges for small businesses, especially those in the services sector.

However, a relaxed social distancing scheme, compounded by a slow start to South Korea's vaccination campaign, suggests that the country could face another wave of outbreaks before herd immunity is achieved. A senior health official on 15 February acknowledged that the government "recognises the possibility of a resurgence in March or April". Public health experts are debating how serious the "fourth peak" could be and whether the government would be ready for it. Partly an effort to delay another wave and mitigate its potential impact, the government starting from 24 February will require all incoming travellers, including South Korean citizens, to submit proof of a negative COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test upon arrival.

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