

Read to be **SURE**

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Exploring
multiple
perspectives.

Issue 2

COVID-19 CURBS: LESS OR MORE?



*All information and weblinks
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Explore multiple perspectives



COVID-19 Curbs—Less or More?

At the crossroads

When the Vaccination Travel Lanes (VTL) were announced and social media feeds were slowly filled up with destinations beyond the boundaries of our living room or neighbourhoods, it served as a reminder of life before the pandemic. It isn't just wanderlust; even if not all of us are privileged to travel, the glimmer of endemicity is on the horizon.

With borders reopening, it signalled that economies could be on the road to recovery. Families could be reunited. The promise of freedom of movement is a much-needed breath of fresh air after living behind our masks for two years.

Could this be the year when we finally move from pandemic to endemic?

Some of us have our fingers crossed. Constant recalibration of restrictions, if anything, have informed us that certainty is not a given.

While many countries have relaxed COVID-19 restrictions, news of variants that could threaten human health and overwhelm public health systems is still very much on our radar. It's difficult to breathe easy when the number of infections is still in the hundreds of thousands and vaccine inequality still a concern across the globe.

Fear and worry about contracting COVID-19 at home, let alone overseas, is a natural reaction for us. Differentiated measures based on vaccination status offer some comfort and a semblance of safety in the face of an unpredictable virus. After

all, what else could we do to make sense of our lives turned upside down?

It's hard to deny the instinct to be social and return to connecting with family, friends and even co-workers in the office freely. Individual efforts such as taking Antigen Rapid Tests (ART) when feeling sick or checking in and out of venues seem like a small price to pay in exchange for some personal freedoms.

Yet, with some countries moving fast to lift almost all their COVID-19 measures, it's easy to feel that the grass is greener elsewhere. Even though we know it's not as simple as "if they can do it, why can't we?", the pandemic fatigue has taken its toll. These other possibilities of life with little or no restrictions have their appeal.

Living in such unprecedented times, there's no handbook to endemicity. Perhaps what we can hold on to, is that we are definitely moving in that direction.





More Curbs?

While the pandemic started unexpectedly, the world has begun to accept that it has fully transformed our daily routine. Today's toddlers relate wearing masks to going out, and terms like "circuit breaker", "lockdown" and "quarantine" have become mainstream. The world came to a standstill as governments took similar approaches to deal with the unknown. Public health resource considerations and a desire to prevent the spread of the virus spurred zero-COVID strategies, despite differences in political systems and development levels.

What's the case for more restrictions?

Countries such as Australia, China, Hong Kong, Macau, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam backed policies aimed at eliminating COVID-19 through strict containment measures, extensive testing, contact tracing and firm international border controls. Such efforts strived to curb the spread of the virus.

While today most of the world expects COVID-19 to become endemic, China continues to maintain this approach. Public support for the zero-COVID approach in China appears strong, possibly due to the social stigma and discrimination of those who contract COVID-19. A study even estimates that China would have to cope with over 600,000 cases a day if travel restrictions are lifted, highlighting China's argument that its approach is one driven by necessity.

What are the downsides to having more restrictions?

Countries fear being left behind in social and economic pursuits as the zero-tolerance strategy has a significant impact on work and life for millions of people.

Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and Vietnam, for example, have shifted their prior zero-COVID policy approach as scientists expect that COVID-19 will become endemic over time — meaning that it will continue to circulate within pockets of the global population for years to come.

73% of the respondents of a survey conducted by the International Air Transport Association reported that their quality of life was suffering due to travel restrictions. They had missed many "family moments, personal development opportunities and business priorities."



Want to know more about COVID-19 restrictions?

- ▶ [What is a Zero-COVID Strategy?](#)
- ▶ [Why China is still trying to achieve zero Covid](#)



Less Curbs?

As people around the world queue up for vaccine shots, some dream of finally being able to attend football games or live music events, while others simply hope this means they can buy groceries safely. The approach towards easing stringent measure varies from country to country — while some opt for a gradual opening, others have lifted measures altogether.

Gradual reopening and public health measures such as mandatory wearing of masks indoors, indoor capacity restrictions, social distancing, and implementing vaccine passports are some strategies that countries can adopt. Countries have also been reopening their borders for international travel to cope with the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, that continue to become more acute.

What have some countries done to reduce restrictions?

Sweden, Norway, and Denmark are among the countries that have decided to live with COVID-19. Denmark was the first country in the European Union that lifted all COVID-19 restrictions. Norway

said that “the time has come to return to a normal daily life” and does not require proof of vaccination for citizens to enter nightclubs, bars or restaurants. Sweden also abolished all COVID-19 related restrictions, announcing that the pandemic has been brought under control.

What are the possible risks from having fewer restrictions?

Optimistic projections estimate that by mid-2022, death and disease rates for COVID-19 may be lower than that of the seasonal common flu owing to the increase in global immunity resulting from high vaccination rates of a population, or moderate vaccination levels coupled with significant prior COVID-19 infections. As a result, this has encouraged the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in many countries across the globe.

Yet, the capacities of public health systems remain a concern for most governments, who resort to keeping a close watch on COVID-19 case numbers, ready to re-impose restrictions whenever deemed necessary. People and businesses are thus caught in confusion when these policies are adjusted.



Additionally, while there is a resumption of international activities as borders open up following vaccine rollouts, the lack of harmonised border measures, restrictions and procedures is a cause of confusion for travellers — who resort to finalising plans as late as possible to keep up with rapidly changing regulations, incited by new virus strands. Fragmented rules about vaccine acceptance, documentation, as well as testing requirements are costly and difficult to navigate.

The return to normalcy is fragile. Countries that are reopening faster have reported a higher death toll in the earlier stages of the pandemic. As individuals begin to integrate back into society — balancing their work and personal lives — the risks of cluster infections remain. Vaccine inequality also remains a concern, especially as it creates unvaccinated pockets where the virus can continue to mutate and spread.



Read on to find out if the costs of reducing COVID-19 restrictions are too high.

- ▶ [Living With COVID-19](#)
- ▶ [Coping With Kids During the Pandemic](#)
- ▶ [Eased Restrictions — Lessons Learnt](#)
- ▶ [Questions of Mobility](#)

A Middle Path?

In early February, experts have opined that Singapore is in strong position to ease Covid-19 restrictions further, in view of Singapore's high vaccination rates and the less severe Omicron variant. However, unlike some European nations like the United Kingdom which have announced a relaxation of precautionary measures, the local experts advocated a more cautious approach which kept to a middle ground, which was in line with the calibrated adjustments announced back in late 2021.

Most countries have now accepted that eradicating COVID-19 is impossible. The emergence of new variants could impact how the pandemic continues to turn up. The Delta variant has shown that an elimination strategy is no longer viable. The highly transmissible Omicron variant has also posed challenges to easing COVID-19 measures, spurring further border restrictions in some countries.

As people find repeated lockdowns and strict quarantines draining, communities need to find a way to learn how to adapt and live with COVID-19 when the virus continues to persist.

History has shown that pandemics do eventually end; as sufficient numbers of people develop immunity, viruses cannot find new hosts to replicate in. Only one human disease, smallpox, has ever

been completely eradicated. Other diseases like influenza, measles, and cholera became endemic over time. These diseases were kept in check by vaccines and medical treatments.

Tightening and loosening restrictions have their own benefits and trade-offs. As countries explore solutions, academics encourage governments to collaborate and share available resources. Better utilisation of tools to manage the pandemic, such as vaccinations, masks and ventilation might assist the world to get back on its feet as quickly and as safely as possible.

As more countries transition to COVID-19 endemicity, continuing efforts are required to address vaccine inequity, enhance health system capacities, and strengthen public health preparedness in view of potential emergent strains and waning vaccine immunities.

Want to know more about how countries hope to move forward?

- ▶ [The Omicron Variant](#)
- ▶ [The Future of COVID-19 Vaccines](#)
- ▶ [Generation COVID-19](#)

