

States start easing Covid-19 curbs on way to new normal as cases decline

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With Covid-19 cases in the country declining, and following the Centre's nudge, states are considering relaxing the remaining restrictions imposed in the wake of the third wave of the pandemic.

While Haryana lifted all such curbs on Wednesday night, several other states, including Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, and Kerala, are expected to hold review meetings soon to take a call on the matter.

The daily Covid cases have been on a declining trend since January 21, when over 337,000 cases were recorded. The daily and weekly positivity rates have also been consistently below the 5 per cent mark. The country's weekly Covid positivity rate currently stands at 3.04 per cent.

The Union health ministry in a letter dated February 15 asked all states to review and do away with additional restrictions after considering the trend in new cases and positivity. It said economic activities and the movement of people should not be hampered by additional restrictions imposed at the state level.

States are going for a gradual easing of restrictions. For instance, Gujarat last week relaxed the night curfew timings by three hours, from 10 pm-6 am to 12 am-5 am.

The Maharashtra government is likely to expedite the lifting of the Covid-19 restrictions by the end of this month, according to government sources. The state cabinet is expected to meet soon to discuss the matter after taking stock of the Covid positivity rate, hospital admission demand from districts, etc. Mumbai, which was the worst-affected city in the state, currently does not have any active containment zones or sealed buildings.

Delhi, which has lifted most of the curbs but continues with night curfew and curtailed business hours for shops, is likely to revisit its stance during a meeting of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority next week. Over 97 per cent of the Covid hospital beds in the Capital are vacant, and the daily positivity rate has dropped from around 30 per cent in mid-January to below 2 per cent in the last few days.

It is not just the states with a lower positivity rate looking at easing restrictions. Kerala, still with a positivity rate of 15.75 per cent, is on track to ease the curbs. The state's disaster management department ended the work from home (WFH) facility for all state and private sector employees. However, Kerala may continue with its zone-based approach for lifting restrictions, given the high positivity rate.

Tamil Nadu has seen a huge drop in Covid caseload, prompting the state government to go for more relaxations from February 16. The number of new cases declined 92 per cent in the state in a fortnight -- from 16,096 on February 1 to 1,310 on February 16. Similarly, active cases saw an 84 per cent fall from 198,130 to 31,368 during the same period.

From Wednesday, all LKG, UKG and playschools, too, started functioning in Tamil Nadu, putting the entire education sector on track. The government also allowed 100 per cent in almost all previously

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regulated places, including theatres, hotels, malls, gyms, lodges, shops, and amusement parks. The state had already lifted night curfew through a notification on January 27.

Keen to push for normalcy and pre-pandemic lifestyle, Maharashtra's health minister, Rajesh Tope, had sought information from the central and state Covid-19 task forces on measures to be adopted to make the state 'mask-free' at the earliest. Tope was drawing on the example of the UK and some other countries which are in favour of citizens giving up the mask.

Government sources have clarified that even if the curbs are lifted, the use of masks would continue.

Earlier this month, Maharashtra allowed national parks and tourist spots to remain open as per their normal timings. Spas, swimming pools, amusement parks, and water parks are also allowed to remain open with 50 per cent capacity. While marriages are allowed to have guests up to 25 per cent of the capacity of the open ground or ceremony halls (or 200 guests, whichever is lower), the state government has relaxed the number of persons attending funerals.

Theatres and restaurants can also now operate at regular timings, but with 50 per cent capacity in most states. Beaches, gardens, and parks can remain open now. Schools have begun even for younger children, with schools offering both online and offline modules, across most states.

West Bengal, too, has been gradually lifting Covid curbs since the beginning of the month amid a drop in cases.

Schools (VIII to XII), colleges, universities, and other educational institutes were allowed to open from February 3. Restaurants, bars and cinema halls have been allowed to operate at 75 per cent capacity, as against 50 per cent earlier. Metro and local trains were also allowed to function at 75 per cent of the seating capacity early this month. As on February 16, West Bengal's positivity rate was 1.18 per cent, compared with more than 26 per cent about a month back.