
Portugal's Eligible Population Is 98% Vaccinated



Last January, Portugal's healthcare system was undergoing collapse, with hospitals overflowing and intensive care beds running out. At that time, Portugal's COVID-19 incidence peaked at 164 per 100,000 (28 January), but Portugal had fewer ICU beds per 100,000 than the rest of Europe. Since Portugal's ICU could only accommodate 672 COVID-19 patients, the occupancy reached dangerously high levels on 17 January 2021, with 647 beds given to COVID-19 patients. People were asked to treat themselves at home.

Eight months later, Portugal's is a world leader in vaccinations, with 86% of its population fully vaccinated. Of those eligible for vaccination (everyone over 12), 98% have been vaccinated. With Portugal's high rate of vaccinations, new cases have dropped to 6.3/100,000 per day. Portugal ended most of its coronavirus restrictions on Friday, 1 October. The high vaccination rate is credited mainly to the efforts of Vice-Admiral Gouveia e Melo, head of Portugal's COVID-19 Vaccination Plan Task Force. He was named task force head after the resignation of Francisco Ramos, former Secretary of State for Health, amidst a vaccination "queue jumping" scandal on 2 February 2021.

Gouveia e Melo said: "We believe we have reached the point of group protection and nearly herd immunity... Things look very good."

Vaccination hesitancy and fears have hampered the vaccination efforts of many other Western nations, with more than 20% of their populations still unprotected. Many are looking at Portugal's success for insights on their vaccination efforts and to learn what happens next after the eligible population is vaccinated.

To other countries, Gouveia e Melo offers: "They need to find people who are not politicians." Messaging consistency was crucial. "I attempted to communicate in a very true and honest way about all doubts and problems... In the beginning, we had some 40% who were unsure." He explains that now only 2.2% do not want the vaccine.

Leonor Beleza, a former Portuguese health minister and current president of the Champalimaud Medical Foundation, credits the success to Gouveia e Melo's military discipline and logistics background. She said: "He formulated a communications policy about what was happening that gave credibility and trust."

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