

Ministers agree to scrap Green Pass from March 1, as PM says virus wave 'breaking'

Bennett says time is right to ease COVID restrictions as number of seriously ill patients drops below 900; ministers to meet on travel regulations

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Prime Minister Naftali Bennett agreed with officials on Thursday that the Green Pass certification system will cease at the end of the month amid a rollback of COVID-19 public health rules, as he declared that the wave of coronavirus infections was "breaking."

At a meeting also attended by Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz and other

officials to review lifting various remaining restrictions, a decision was made not to extend the Green Pass beyond March 1, the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.

The Green Pass certificate grants entry to public venues and gatherings to those who have been vaccinated, recovered from COVID-19, or recently tested negative for the virus.

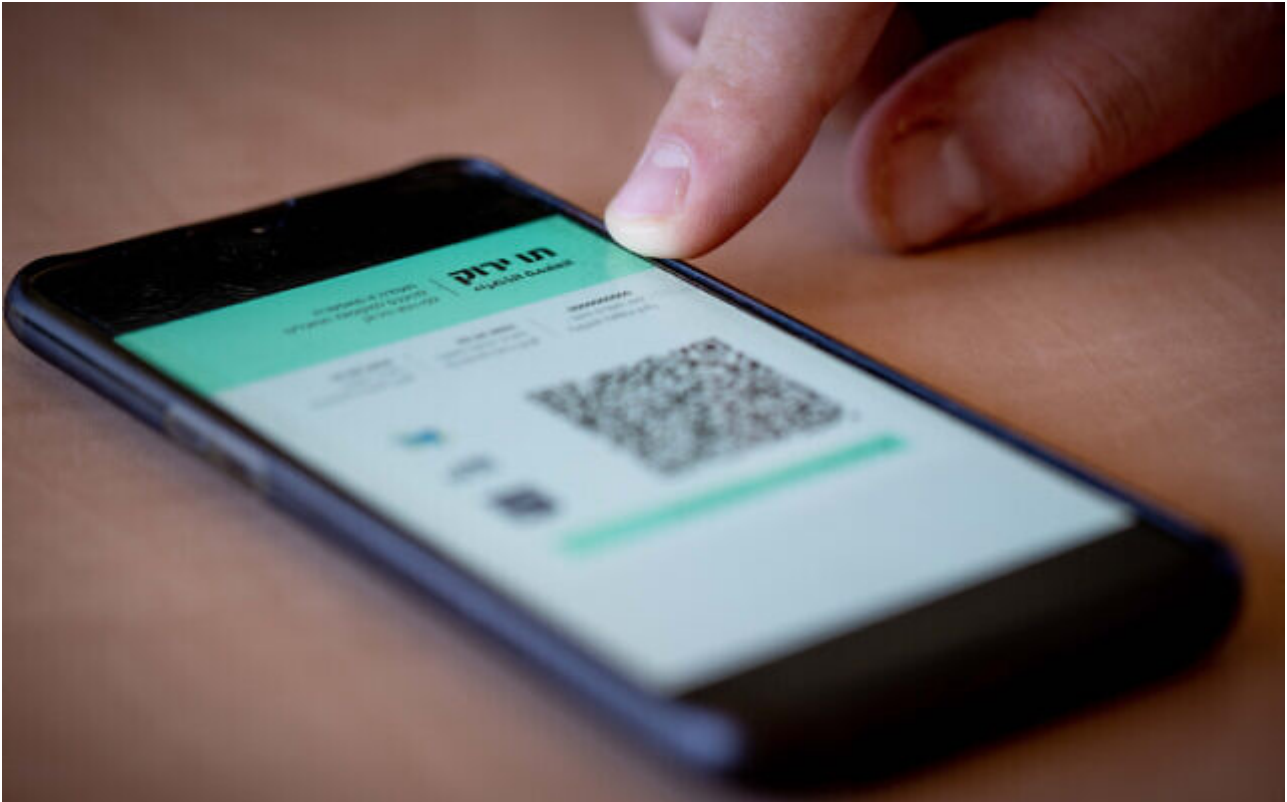
The pass has been a key part of the government's efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus, including the recent Omicron variant, which pushed infection rates to record levels since the beginning of the year.

"This wave is breaking," Bennett said at the start of the meeting according to the statement. "We are seeing a decline in the number of severely ill.

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"We were the first country to close its gates in the Omicron wave; therefore, this is also the time for a gradual relaxation," Bennett said referring to the closure of Israel's borders to non-nationals in November as the highly infectious strain was first detected. "As far as I am concerned, we must prepare to relax the restrictions soon."



An Illustration of the 'Green Pass' vaccine certification on October 4, 2021. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

The Prime Minister's Office said that while the Green Pass system would lapse, antigen tests will continue to be required upon entering retirement homes.

Bennett also said that it was important that the country prepare for any future waves of infection.

"I want us to learn the lessons where necessary from managing this wave so we will be better prepared for future scenarios," he said.

At the meeting, there were clashes between health and finance ministry officials over budgeting for a system that Bennett had called for to monitor COVID-19 outbreaks all over the world in order to give Israel time to prepare for any future new variants.

The Health Ministry officials said they have still not received budgeting for the project and charged that the treasury was dragging its feet. The Finance Ministry for its part claimed that the Health Ministry was

demanding too much money, Ynet reported.



Illustrative: Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, right, and Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz hold a press conference at HaKiryat military base in Tel Aviv, November 26, 2021. (Moti Milrod)

Acting head of budgeting at the Finance Ministry Yosef Gratus said the Health Ministry was making “unfounded” demands for needs that would cost “tens of millions,” the Ynet website reported.

“Asking 50 people to monitor what is happening abroad is delusional,” he reportedly said.

Horowitz criticized Gratus, saying that use of the term “delusional” was uncalled for, and Health Ministry Director-General Nachman Ash denied that a request was made for so many positions to staff the program.

Ministers are set to meet again later on Thursday for further discussions on easing restrictions, including those on arrivals from abroad.



People some with face masks shop for grocery at the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem on February 8, 2022. (Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90)

The Health Ministry on Wednesday [recommended ending the quarantine](#) requirement for Israeli travelers returning from abroad.

The ministry's other recommendations include canceling the requirement for returning travelers to present a COVID test at the airport before boarding a flight to Israel (though the test upon arrival at Ben Gurion after landing will remain) and ending quarantine for unvaccinated children who travel abroad.

Unvaccinated non-Israeli children under age 12 should be allowed to enter if they are accompanied by vaccinated parents, and will need to isolate until they receive a negative test result, the ministry said. Unvaccinated non-Israelis over the age of 12 should still not be allowed to enter the country.

Those changes and others were to be discussed at the later meeting Thursday. The requirement of wearing protective masks in closed spaces

and existing rules for the education system are expected to remain in place.

Health Ministry figures published Thursday showed a continued downward trend in infections, with 21,152 cases diagnosed the day before, slightly higher than Tuesday's number but still a fraction of the over 80,000 cases a day seen in January

The number of seriously ill patients, considered a key marker of the severity of the wave, dropped to 886, down from over 900 the day before.

There were 173,685 active patients. With the deaths of 11 people on Wednesday, the toll since the start of the pandemic rose to 9,710.

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