

Vaccine as a way out

Vaccinating champion and few infections: things are going better in Portugal

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Everyone wears a mouth cap on the market in Portugal Image © ANP

While the number of infections and hospital admissions is rising again in the Netherlands, it remains limited in Portugal. In that country, 98 percent of people over the age of 12 have been vaccinated, making it the world champion. "Vaccination is a good habit with us."

"The high vaccination rate is definitely the reason that we currently have so few people with corona in hospital," said Miguel Prudêncio, researcher at the IMM, a biomedical institute in Lisbon. There are currently a few hundred infections a day in Portugal and about sixty people are in intensive care. "These are mainly older people who are already very frail. We hardly see any sick people in the younger age categories."

Own responsibility

Portugal can therefore let go of many restrictions. Prime Minister Antonio Costa announced that the country is now entering a phase of 'own responsibility'. Bars and clubs are open, although you still need a QR code to enter. But in other places there are virtually no restrictions.



The nightlife in Portugal is back in full swing

"Everything is possible again," says Mark Teering. He works as a team leader in a call center in Lisbon and has lived there for six years now. "But everyone still adheres very much to the rules that were there before. Even outside people wear mouth caps, everyone keeps their distance and disinfects their hands. It has really become automatic."

Prudêncio emphasizes that a combination of the high vaccination rate and compliance with the rules ultimately led to the low number of infections. "We knew beforehand that vaccines provide protection to a certain extent."

scary images

At the beginning of this year, the situation in Portugal was completely different. In January and February, hospitals were full of corona patients and eventually there were more than 300 deaths a day. People even had to be taken to Austria, because the care in Portugal itself could no longer handle it.

According to many people, those shocking images have also boosted vaccination willingness in the country. "I also think that the fear from then still makes people, especially the elderly, cautious," says Prudêncio.



People in Lisbon still wear mouth caps outside too

Mark Teering also remembers the images from then. "It was really special to see that there were queues with ambulances and sirens blaring. That's really something I only know from war films, but suddenly it was reality." He also sees how the corona crisis has affected many companies. "People here earn quite little, while life is not cheap. They realize here that vaccination is the easiest and fastest way to move on with your life."

Vaccination Culture

The success of the high vaccination coverage in Portugal is largely due to the 60-year-old former submarine commander Henrique Gouveia e Melo. He led the vaccination strategy. The deployment of a soldier instead of a politician as the figurehead of the campaign proved to be effective. "He is approachable, but also strict. And that has helped," says Prudêncio. "People got the feeling that the situation was in good hands with him."



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In addition, Portugal has always had a high vaccination readiness. "What I hear around me is that people are taught from childhood that vaccines are good," says Teering. "People think: it has never done any harm, so why should it now? People rely, much more than in the Netherlands, on the government and health organizations. They follow more easily."

Communication was good

"Portuguese love to complain about the authorities, but they also have a lot of respect for them," Prudêncio laughs. "It's very typical, but I have no deeper explanation for it. Authorities have done their job well when it comes to communication."

Scientists have also played an important role in the process, he says. "We made a lot of media appearances, explained everything as best we could and answered questions from concerned people."