

Belgium passes 2,000 coronavirus cases, deaths mount

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The number of coronavirus cases recorded in Belgium surged past 2,000 on Friday and the number of deaths attributed to the disease COVID-19 jumped up by 16 to 37.

According to the country's national [crisis](#) centre, 462 new confirmed cases of the virus have been reported, bringing the total to 2,257 in a country of 11.4 million people.

Two-thirds of the new cases overnight were in Dutch-speaking Flanders, in northern Belgium.

Emmanuel Andre, a spokesman for the crisis centre, said Belgium was better prepared than Italy had been when it became the focus of the European outbreak, but that hospitals would need more space for the most serious cases.

In the past 24 hours another 203 people have been admitted to hospital in Belgium, and 164 of them will require [intensive care](#), such as breathing assistance.

"The average age of those hospitalised is around 60," he said. "In Belgium we have 1,900 beds equipped with ventilators, and places are being set up today to increase this number."

"We are expecting demand to increase in the coming days," Andre warned.

Europe is now the epicentre of the pandemic that emerged in China in December, with Italy now the hardest country.

Belgium is now one of several European countries to order a national lockdown, although one less sternly enforced than in neighbouring France—and with more exceptions.

Already, bars and restaurants are shut and many people have been asked to work from home and to avoid socialising and crowds, but officials expect the measures to tighten.

"Everyone should respect these measures, and in my opinion, exceptions to the rules will come to an end in the coming days," another crisis centre spokesman Benoit Ramacker said.

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