

COVID-19 could put fifth of UK staff off work: government

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Up to one fifth of employees could be off work in Britain when the coronavirus outbreak peaks, the government said Tuesday outlining a new action plan.

Britain had 51 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of 9:00 am (0900 GMT), an increase of 12 in 24 hours, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned the count was "highly likely" to keep rising.

Globally, more than 3,100 people have died and over 90,000 have been infected.

But the British premier said: "For the overwhelming majority of people who contract the virus, this will be a mild disease from which they will speedily and fully recover."

In a press conference with his chief medical and scientific advisors at Downing Street, Johnson unveiled the steps the government would take if coronavirus takes hold in Britain.

These include asking people to work from home, reducing the number of large gatherings such as football matches and shutting schools.

"In a stretching scenario, it is possible that up to one fifth of employees may be absent from work during peak weeks," the plan says.

The pressure on emergency services could see police concentrate on only the most serious crimes with hospitals both delaying operations and bringing retired healthcare staff back to work.

But these measures will not be introduced until the outbreak is clearly established, and only then if experts assess the benefits outweigh the costs.

The peak of the virus is expected to occur two to three months after the outbreak begins.

"For the vast majority of the people of this country, we should be going

about our business as usual," Johnson said.

He said that hand washing with soap and water—"for the length of time it takes to sing 'Happy Birthday' twice"—was the most effective way to prevent the virus spreading.

"I continue to shake hands," he added.

UK health officials say that in the worst case scenario, 80 percent of the population could become infected.

Evidence from China, where the outbreak began, suggests a mortality rate of one percent, pointing to up to 500,000 deaths in Britain.

However, this includes many variables and Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said predicting numbers was "largely speculative".

The risk was highest for elderly people and those with underlying health conditions. Children appear to be less affected than other groups, he added.

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