

EU health ministers seek way to slow virus spread

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European health ministers launched crisis talks Friday on how to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, as the EU scrambles to gather protective medical supplies.

"The virus is in Europe, the challenge is to slow down and contain it," Germany's Jens Spahn said as colleagues from the 27 EU member states arrived at the meeting.

"The new epidemic is here," he said, emphasising the key task now was to slow the spread while treatments are developed.

Spahn said that Germany did not yet see a need to limit free movement across borders within the union.

Czech health minister Adam Vojtech said supplies of protective suits and masks were limited and that European health workers should be first in line as production is ramped up.

"We're trying to negotiate with producers to supply the market, but production is limited. The demand is much higher than the supply worldwide. It is not easy," he said.

The novel [coronavirus](#) strain that erupted in China this year and causes the COVID-19 disease has killed more than 3,300 people and infected nearly 100,000 in about 85 nations.

Europe has not yet been hit as bad as China, but the [virus](#) is spreading across the continent and Italy in particular has a major outbreak, with 148 dead in just over two weeks.

EU officials have stressed the importance of a coordinated response but major members like Germany and France have banned the export of medical protection gear such as masks and gloves.

Austria's Rudolf Anschober said he did not want to discuss this policy "in front of the cameras".

"We'll be looking at the preparedness of member states their needs. And we will be looking at the need for solidarity," EU [health](#) commissioner Stella Kyriakides said.

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