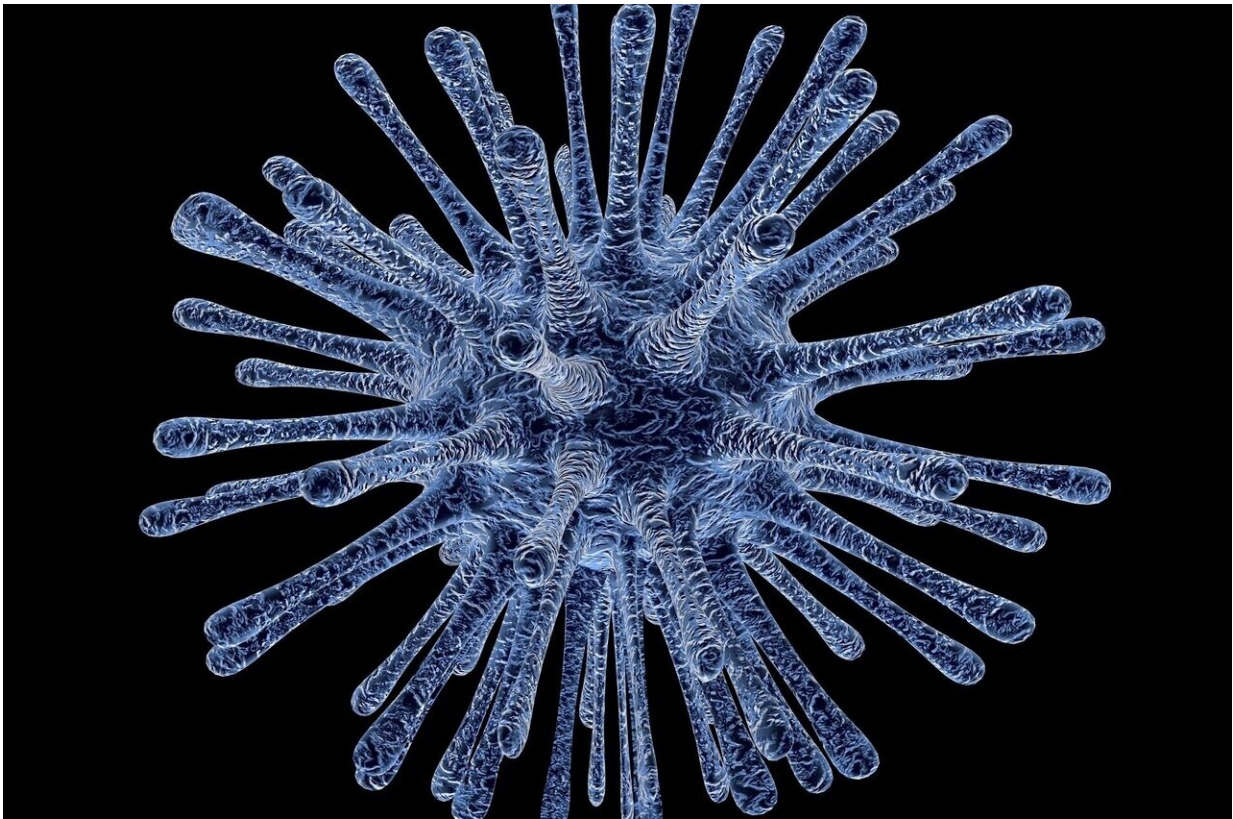


Europe ramps up virus response as Italy lockdown takes effect

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European nations on Wednesday shut schools and universities and slapped more restrictions on travel, sport and cultural events over the surging coronavirus outbreak, as more countries announced deaths from

the epidemic.

Italy remains at the centre of Europe's outbreak as another jump in cases on Tuesday took the total to more than 10,000 infections and deaths rose by a third to 631.

Millions of Italians woke to deserted streets and shuttered shops after officials imposed a national lockdown, while the government has pledged 25 billion euros (\$28 billion) to fight the virus.

Countries including Poland and Ukraine announced school closures despite no significant outbreaks being reported.

Austria, which has already reintroduced [border controls](#) with Italy, said it was shutting museums and halting [train services](#) to its southern neighbour.

China, still the worst-affected country with more than 80,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths, offered hope to the rest of the world by again announcing negligible new daily infections and only a relatively small number of deaths.

Some businesses in China's central Hubei province—where the virus was first detected in December—were told they could resume operations, reducing fears of a prolonged disruption of supply chains.

Belgium and Panama are the most recent countries to announce their first confirmed deaths from the virus, while Spain announced that the number of cases has topped 2,000 with 47 deaths.

'It makes people nervous'

Italy's lockdown, unprecedented in western Europe, stops people from

moving around or leaving the country unless they have a valid medical, family or work reason.

Foreigners are still allowed to leave—many already have—and the last stragglers were racing to catch flights after a slew of cancellations.

"We have people saying they will put us on a flight back," Mina, a 58-year-old Indian national, told AFP next to Rome's deserted Colosseum, saying she and her family were "waiting for a call".

Despite the improving situation in China, officials imposed new measures, decreeing that all international arrivals in Beijing must undergo two weeks of quarantine.

And the United States saw the first signs of an emergency footing with the New York city government forming a containment zone around a suburb at the centre of an outbreak.

National Guard troops were being called in to help deliver food and enforce the zone around New Rochelle, with officials insisting the measures were designed only to facilitate self-quarantine, not to isolate the area.

But some locals were not convinced about the measures.

"It makes people nervous to be around others, it makes people nervous to get inside into businesses and such," Miles Goldberg, who runs a bar in New Rochelle, told AFP.

Trump plan flounders

Disruption to supply chains from China, flagging demand and wildly fluctuating stock markets have combined to push governments into

action.

US President Donald Trump has promised "major" economic stimulus measures, the biggest item on his wish list being a cut in [payroll taxes](#).

But even his allies in Congress have questioned the cost and after a bruising round of negotiations with sceptical lawmakers he failed to provide further detail.

The Bank of England slashed its main interest rate to 0.25 percent, following a similar move by the US Federal Reserve last week, in a move is intended to make borrowing cheaper to boost spending and economic activity.

Confusion over testing and questions over leadership mean the United States remains a cause for concern and the number of infections almost doubled on Tuesday to top 1,000.

Epidemiologists have said faulty test kits coupled with a strategy that initially targeted too few people allowed the disease to spread without being detected.

The latest lightning rod for criticism was the evacuation of the Grand Princess cruise ship, docked in California with 21 confirmed cases on board—sharp differences emerging between statements from national and state officials.

Passengers also complained of a lack of information.

"We are getting really frustrated that they still have not told us where our ultimate destination will be," passenger Carolyn Wright, a 63-year-old from New Mexico, told AFP.

Motor-racing scare

The virus continued to rip up the schedules of musicians, sports stars and cultural figures as governments around the world banned large gatherings.

England's top-flight football league saw its first cancellation with Wednesday's match between Arsenal and Manchester City postponed after players from the London club were put into quarantine.

Motor racing became the latest sport to report a scare, with two members of the Haas Formula One team isolating themselves before the Australian Grand Prix after showing symptoms.

Japan—where this year's Olympic Games are due to be held—was forced to scale back commemorations of the ninth anniversary of the killer tsunami that triggered the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, cancelling the annual public ceremony.

"It's time to take every possible measure to prevent the spread of infections in our country," said Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Elsewhere in Asia, the Philippines has called off crucifixion reenactments, a tourist spectacle usually held on Good Friday.

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