

Italy's virus toll tops 4,000 after new one-day record

March 20 2020



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Italy reported a record 627 new coronavirus deaths Friday and saw its world-topping toll surpass 4,000, despite government efforts to stem the pandemic's spread.

The Mediterranean country's daily rate of fatalities is now higher than that officially reported by China at the peak of its outbreak around Wuhan's Hubei province.

But Matteo Bassetti of Italy's prestigious San Martino clinic in Genoa said the government probably had no idea how many people really had the new disease.

"There are so many people walking around who have the virus and who are at risk of infecting others," Bassetti told Italy's AGI news agency.

"The 40,000 cases we are talking about (in Italy) could actually be 100 times higher."

Worse than Wuhan?

Italy is rapidly notching up one grim record after the next as it becomes the new global epicentre of COVID-19.

In less than four weeks, it has recorded more deaths than China officially registered since reporting its first infection to the World Health Organization in late December.

Italy has seen more than 1,500 deaths from COVID-19 in the past three days alone.

Italy's total number of deaths now stands at 4,032.

Infections rose Friday by nearly 6,000—another international record—to 47,021.

The nation of 60 million accounted for around 36.2 percent of the world's coronavirus deaths at 1900 GMT.

The Italian government already plans to extend a ban on public gatherings and the shutdown of almost all businesses beyond a March 25 deadline.

But worried regional leaders are pushing the national government to adopt even tougher restrictions, such as a ban on outdoor exercise and the closure of all stores on Sundays.

Some city authorities are taking matters into their own hands.

Milan on Friday deployed more than 100 soldiers to help police the streets and ensure no one is found outdoors without a legitimate reason, such as buying food.

Old and sick

The government took the additional step Friday of closing all parks. Joggers are being encouraged to run around the block and stay close to their homes.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 12 and had been hoping to see the first results after two weeks.

But civil protection service chief Angelo Borrelli said Friday it was premature to think about when infections might begin to plateau.

"There are reasons to think that it could be next week or the week after," Borrelli told reporters.

"But it is not a scientific fact."

Italy's death rate of 8.6 percent among those registered with infections is significantly higher than in most other countries.

Medical experts attribute this to Italy's average age of 45.4—seven years higher than in China.

The overwhelming majority of Italy's fatal cases involved elderly people with at least one pre-existing condition.

The National Health Institute (ISS) said Friday that the average age of Italy first 3,200 victims was 78.5.

Almost 49 percent of them had three or more pre-existing conditions.

Just 1.2 percent of those who died had no other ailments.

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Citation: Italy's virus toll tops 4,000 after new one-day record (2020, March 20) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-italy-virus-toll-tops-one-day.html>

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