

In Nordics, coronavirus may be deadly boring, but not yet deadly

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Holed up in his parents' home since testing positive, Viktor Andersson has been killing time watching movies.

For him, like almost all of those infected in the Nordic countries, the new coronavirus has yet to lead to anything more than a tedious quarantine.

With more than 1,000 cases detected, the Nordic countries have not been spared the epidemic that has locked down entire cities and countries, raising fears of an economic recession and sending financial markets into a downward spiral.

By Wednesday, the disease had killed more than 4,281 people out of 118,554 cases detected worldwide, with China, Italy, South Korea, Iran and France hardest hit.

But the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—have not reported any deaths so far, even though the virus has been described as deadlier than the seasonal flu which claims hundreds of victims in the region each year.

From Reykjavik to Helsinki, the large majority of those infected with COVID-19 are, like Viktor, fit as fiddles and just waiting things out at home until they are no longer contagious and can return to their normal routines.

"I'm not supposed to leave the house, except for walks close by where I should avoid approaching people," the 22-year-old Swede told AFP.

Confined to his parents' house in Karlstad in western Sweden until two successive tests come back negative, this third-division hockey player is believed to have contracted the virus in an airport during a late February trip to Amsterdam with his buddies.

"I've watched a lot of movies. I feel like I've seen every single James Bond movie. There's also been quite a lot of card-playing with my parents. You simply have to find things to keep yourself busy," he told AFP.

Early days

Of the 81 cases detected in Iceland, none have required hospitalisation. In Norway, only a handful of the 277 cases have been admitted to hospital.

That is partly due to a number of sociological and demographic factors, according to experts.

The Nordics have "a population that is generally healthy and vaccinated against illnesses, universal health care, not many smokers or much industrial pollution," said Oystein Olsvik, a professor of medical microbiology at Tromso University in northern Norway.

"The Scandinavian population is generally less susceptible to this kind of illness that can develop in densely-populated regions of China," he added.

Also, the epidemic is still in its early days in the region, having so far only affected a specific category of the population.

Most Scandinavians who have tested positive have been relatively healthy and young—average age 44 in Norway—and were infected during recent ski holidays in Italy and Austria, or have been in close contact with those infected there.

"If you compare with Italy for example, where a majority of those infected are very old... (This is) a good illustration that this is not dangerous for those who are young and healthy but... could be very serious if you are old," said Johan von Schreeb, a professor of global disaster medicine at Stockholm's Karolinska Institute.

In addition, an elderly person in Scandinavia is generally in good health.

"When you're 80 in China, you're really old, whereas a Norwegian in their 80s can complete the Birken (a famed cross-country ski race) or cycle from Oslo to Trondheim," noted professor Olsvik.

Drive-through testing

Whether they have been tested or not, travellers returning from high-risk areas have been asked to self-quarantine for two weeks.

At the same time, healthcare services are doing everything they can to detect the virus at the earliest stage.

"We are diagnosing these cases just maybe one or two days after they show the earliest sign of symptoms and those are extremely mild symptoms," explained Kjartan Hreinn Njalsson, an assistant to Iceland's Director of Health.

"These people are extremely aware of their health condition and they are in good contact with their physician, so they monitor their health really well and they get a lot of feedback on how to behave and how to take

good care of themselves."

In Oslo, Stockholm and in Aarhus in Denmark, there are drive-through testing facilities outside hospitals. Iceland, meanwhile, is planning to screen a swathe of its population to see how widespread the virus is.

But it is unlikely northern Europe will totally escape COVID-19 deaths.

Once the virus spreads to the general population, as it is eventually expected to do, hospital wards and especially intensive care units risk being snowed under.

And then, the death toll could become alarming.

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