

## France nears 20,000 COVID deaths but situation 'improving'

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3D print of a spike protein of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19—in front of a 3D print of a SARS-CoV-2 virus particle. The spike protein (foreground) enables the virus to enter and infect human cells. On the virus model, the virus surface (blue) is covered with spike proteins (red) that enable the virus to enter and infect human cells. Credit: NIH

France's prime minister said the country was starting to beat back the coronavirus as the outbreak's death toll approached 20,000 Sunday while new hospitalisations continued a slow decline.

The country reported 395 deaths from COVID-19 in the last 24 hours, the government said, bringing the [epidemic](#) tally to 19,718.

But in a positive sign, the number of people in hospital declined for the fifth day in a row to 30,610—a small decline of 29, top health official Jerome Salomon told a televised press conference.

There were 5,744 people in [intensive care](#), added Salomon, 89 fewer in the 11th consecutive day of decline.

"We are scoring points against the epidemic," Prime Minister Edouard Philippe told the same briefing, adding the "situation is improving gradually, slowly, but surely" and the epidemic is "slowing".

But he stressed that a nationwide lockdown which entered into force on March 17 to halt the spread of the virus must be strictly respected until May 11, when it will start being lifted in phases.

"We are not out of the health crisis yet," said Philippe, warning that lifting anti-infection barrier measures too soon risked unleashing a second wave of the epidemic.

He said that since relatively few people in France have been exposed to the virus, there has been no widespread build-up of immunity.

A vaccine is unlikely to become available until next year, and there is no known effective treatment, making it essential to maintain measures to stop person-to-person infection.

## Life will not be the same

People will "probably" be required to wear masks on public transport as an infection prevention measure from May 11, the premier announced, even as Health Minister Olivier Veran said the jury was out on the efficacy of public mask-wearing as a means of epidemic control.

Philippe said those people who can work from home should continue to do so as far as possible, and that cafes and restaurants will remain shuttered for the time being.

Businesses that will be open, such as supermarkets, will have to ensure measures are in place enabling people to respect the one-metre safety distance from one another, and they may be expected to provide virus-killing hand sanitising gel to all customers.

Schools will reopen bit by bit, but the details have yet to be hashed out.

"To imagine that, because the situation has stopped worsening and is starting to improve, the epidemic is behind us, would be a mistake," said Philippe, stressing that people were still dying every day.

"Our life from May 11 will not be like our life before, not immediately, and probably not for a long time."

It would, for example, be "unreasonable" for people to think of taking a foreign trip in the near future, Philippe said.

Veran said the government was working on making 500,000 [coronavirus](#) tests possible per week for people who show symptoms and those they had been in contact with—up from the current 150,000 weekly.

People who test positive will be placed in isolation.

## 'Brutal' economic downturn coming

France will shortly be producing some 17 million washable, reusable fabric masks for the general public per week, Veran added.

Eight million were produced in France in the past week, and tens of millions more have been ordered from abroad.

Philippe reiterated that the [economic crisis](#) that will result from lockdown measures taken to fight the epidemic would be "brutal".

France expects its worse recession in 2020 since the end of World War II, with [economic activity](#) down 36 percent since the lockdown started.

But economic life cannot resume until the virus has stopped circulating among the population and hospitals' capacity to treat the seriously ill is restored, the [prime minister](#) said.

And even when it does, people will have to live differently—continuing to avoid physical proximity to others.

"Not respecting the barrier measures literally exposes us to a resumption of the epidemic," Philippe warned.

The government will unveil a more detailed plan on the lifting of confinement in the next two weeks.

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