

Face masks mandatory in northeast Spain amid virus uptick

July 8 2020, by Joseph Wilson



Customers wearing face masks buy sandals at a market in Barcelona on Wednesday, July 8, 2020. Spain's northeastern Catalonia region will make mandatory the use of face masks outdoors even when social distancing can be maintained, regional chief Quim Torra announced Wednesday. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

Authorities in northeast Spain will start fining individuals who do not wear face masks 100 euros (\$113) starting Thursday when the use of masks becomes mandatory in Barcelona and the surrounding Catalonia region following a resurgence of the coronavirus.

Spain ended a nationwide lockdown in mid-June after restrictions on movement and public activity succeeded in reining in the country's [virus outbreak](#) after it had pushed the healthcare system to the breaking point and killed thousands of people.

But with most restrictions lifted and some people not following social-distancing rules, the number of confirmed new cases reported daily in Spain has begun to creep up. Confirmed cases doubled between Tuesday and Wednesday amid dozens of small outbreaks.

The biggest increase was in the Catalonia region, with 52 new confirmed cases in a 24-hour period and nearly 2,000 in the past two weeks.

A number of the 500 recent confirmed cases in a rural county around the city of Lleida have been tied to the summer fruit harvest, which draws in migrant day laborers who often work and live in poor conditions. Regional authorities locked down the area on Saturday and have linked 11 of 15 outbreaks there to farm work.

Health authorities warn that the area's hospitals are already filling up. An inflatable emergency ward has been installed at the gates of a local hospital, a grim reminder of the makeshift medical facilities and morgues set up in Spain when it was among the world's leading virus hot spots in the spring.



Customers wearing face masks buy clothes for one euro at a stall in a market in Barcelona on Wednesday, July 8, 2020. Spain's northeastern Catalonia region will make mandatory the use of face masks outdoors even when social distancing can be maintained, regional chief Quim Torra announced Wednesday. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

"We are not saturated now, but we could be in the next few days if we don't reinforce our [medical staff](#) and start transferring patients," regional health official Ramón Sentís said Wednesday.

Masks are mandatory in shared indoor spaces and also outdoors when distance can't be maintained throughout Spain. Catalonia, which has a population of 7.5 million, is the first region to extend the requirement to situations when people are able to remain 1.5 meters (5 feet) from one

another.

The move comes after a notable drop in face mask use in the streets and adherence to social distancing rules.

A county in the northwest Galicia region that is home to 71,000 residents also has been closed off, while masks are now mandatory in a town in the central north Basque Country region. Both Galicia and the Basque Country have regional elections scheduled for Sunday.



Customers wearing face masks walk past a stall in a market in Barcelona on Wednesday, July 8, 2020. Spain's northeastern Catalonia region will make mandatory the use of face masks outdoors even when social distancing can be maintained, regional chief Quim Torra announced Wednesday. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



A vendor selling face masks waits for customers at a stall in a market in Barcelona on Wednesday, July 8, 2020. Spain's northeastern Catalonia region will make mandatory the use of face masks outdoors even when social distancing can be maintained, regional chief Quim Torra announced Wednesday. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



Customers wearing face masks pick second hand fabrics in a market in Barcelona on Wednesday, July 8, 2020. Spain's northeastern Catalonia region will make mandatory the use of face masks outdoors even when social distancing can be maintained, regional chief Quim Torra announced Wednesday. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

The uptick in cases comes as Spain is hoping to salvage its critical tourism industry by encouraging Spaniards to take vacations inside the country and sending the message to foreigners that Spain is a safe place to visit despite the pandemic. Spain had a pandemic death toll of more than 28,390 as of Wednesday.

Neighboring Portugal, which had done well in controlling the virus, is also concerned about an increase in new virus cases in the capital of

Lisbon.

Portugal's Health Ministry on Wednesday reported 443 new cases, 74% of them in the Lisbon metropolitan area.

Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa said most of the country's stubbornly high daily number of confirmed cases is largely among people who live together.

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