

New restrictions for northeast England as virus cases surge

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More than two million people in northeast England face new restrictions because of a surge in coronavirus cases, the government announced on Thursday, as it battled to contain a potential second wave of infection.

Tighter regulations on socialising are due to come into force from Friday in Northumberland, North and South Tyneside, Newcastle-upon-Tyne,

Gateshead, and County Durham.

Residents will be banned from socialising in homes or gardens with people from outside their household, while food and drink venues will be restricted to table service only.

Pubs and bars will have to shut early by 10:00 pm (2100 GMT).

"We do not take these decisions lightly," Health Secretary Matt Hancock told parliament, acknowledging they would have a "real impact on families, on businesses and on communities".

But he added: "We must follow the data and act, and the data says that we must act now."

Britain has been the worst-hit country in Europe by the pandemic, with the government registering nearly 42,000 deaths.

The Office of National Statistics, which uses broader criteria for counting COVID-19 fatalities, has said closer to 58,000 Britons have died from the virus.

The government imposed new rules across England on Monday to limit socialising to groups of six people or fewer, as daily cases reach levels not seen since early May.

According to government statistics, a total of 18,371 people tested positive in England in the week to September 19—up 75 percent on the previous week.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged people to observe the new rules to "stop the second hump" in the pandemic, comparing Britain's trajectory of resurgent cases to a camel's profile.

He said it was "the only way to make sure the country is able to enjoy Christmas" and was an alternative to another full lockdown, which he has said would be financially disastrous.

'Stop the surge'

In an interview with The Sun newspaper, Johnson reaffirmed his position against shutting down sections of the economy, which has been battered by the outbreak.

"We can grip it now, stop the surge, arrest the spike, stop the second hump of the dromedary, flatten the second hump," he said.

"Dromedary or camel? I can't remember if it is a dromedary or a camel that has two humps? Umm. Please check."

Dromedaries are Arabian camels which have only one hump.

Johnson had compared Britain's first wave of virus cases to a sombrero hat, imploring people to "squash it" by obeying the nationwide lockdown in place from late March until June.

But he has faced stinging criticism this week over the failure to achieve the "world-beating" testing and tracing system he promised would be in place over the summer months.

The government admits that increasing demand for virus tests is posing problems, after hospital bosses warned delays in the system were jeopardising healthcare services.

It has blamed people without symptoms who do not need tests overburdening the system, with ministers vowing to unveil new rules to prioritise cases in the coming days.

Johnson said the system was "really struggling with the real weight of demand", as schools return and businesses start up again, bringing more people into close contact.

He has promised to have testing capacity up to 500,000 a day by the end of October to help cope with increased demand as winter approaches and seasonal flu cases increase.

As well as northeast England, a new local lockdown was coming into force in the Rhonda Cynon Taf region of South Wales.

But the government removed Thailand and Singapore from its list of countries where travellers must quarantine for 14 days on their return to England.

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