

Virus at 'turning point' in Europe, hitting at-risk groups

October 16 2020, by Colleen Barry and Angela Charlton



A man wearing a face mask walks past the London Eye on Westminster Bridge in London, Friday, Oct. 16, 2020. The British government is sticking to its strategy of tiered, regional restrictions to combat COVID-19 amid mounting political and scientific pressure for stronger nationwide measures to prevent the pandemic from spiraling out of control. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Doctors are warning that Europe is at a turning point as the coronavirus surges back across the continent, including among vulnerable people, and governments try to impose restrictions without locking whole economies down.

With newly confirmed cases reaching records, the World Health Organization warned Friday that intensive care units in a number of European cities could reach maximum capacity in the coming weeks.

In response to the surge, the Czech Republic has shut schools and is building a field hospital, Poland has limited restaurant hours and closed gyms and schools, and France is planning a 9 p.m. curfew in Paris and other big cities. In Britain, authorities are closing pubs and bars in areas in the country's north, while putting limits on socializing in London and other parts of the country.

Europe is not alone in seeing a resurgence. In the United States, new cases per day are on the rise in 44 states, and deaths per day are climbing in 30.

"If we don't get a handle on this, we run the risk of getting into a situation that's harder to control," Bertrand Levrat, the head of Switzerland's biggest hospital complex, told The Associated Press. "We are really at a turning point—things can go both ways."

But while officials are sounding the alarm on rising cases, they are also wary of imposing the stricter nationwide lockdowns that devastated their economies this spring. Instead, they are trying more targeted restrictions.

France is deploying 12,000 extra police to enforce its new curfew; Saturday night will be the first time establishments will be forced to close at 9 p.m. Restaurants, cinemas and theaters are trying to figure out how can survive the forced early closures.



A boy wears a face mask as he looks around pumpkins at the Didier Farms in Lincolnshire, Ill., Thursday, Oct. 15, 2020. The pumpkin patch reopens with COVID-19 restrictions such as requiring face masks while waiting in lines or anywhere you can't maintain 6 feet of distance, and they are providing sanitizer. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh)

One movie theater chain will start opening at 8 a.m. in hopes of making up evening losses. Since Paris restaurants generally open at 7 or 7:30 p.m. for dinner, some might close altogether because it no longer makes financial sense to stay open for such a short shift.

"The French culture world isn't invincible, it needs help," author and filmmaker Yoann Sfar, who has a new movie coming out, said Friday on

RTL radio.

Italy, the first country outside of Asia to detect local transmission of the virus, has banned pickup sports and public gatherings after health officials said the resurgence had reached "an acute phase" following a period of relative grace after its particularly strict lockdown.

The governor of Campania, which was mostly spared in the spring but is seeing infections skyrocket, urged quick action, noting the area around Naples is the most densely populated in the country.

"Half measures are not worth anything anymore," Vincenzo de Luca said in a Facebook video. He already announced the closure of schools for the rest of the month, against the wishes of Rome.

Massimo Galli, the director of infectious diseases at Milan's Luigi Sacco hospital, said Italy's surge is not the result of record testing, as policy makers have suggested, but a sign of a real return among the population most at risk of developing serious illness if infected.

That is a worrying trend since a tide of serious cases has the potential to swamp hospitals, and it's one that can be seen in other countries on the continent as many see even higher numbers than Italy.



People wearing masks walk the streets of Bayonne, southwestern France, Friday, Oct. 16, 2020. France registered more than 30,000 virus cases Thursday, its highest single-day jump since the pandemic began, and nearly 200 cases per 100,000 people over the past week. (AP Photo/Bob Edme)

France, Spain and Britain recorded more than 300 infections per 100,000 residents over the past two weeks, compared to Italy's quickening but relatively low 106.

The Czech Republic reported over 700 people infected per 100,000, and the country's military will start to build a field hospital at Prague's exhibition center this weekend—a reminder of the dark days of spring when many countries put up makeshift facilities to ease pressure on

overwhelmed medical centers. The government is also negotiating with neighboring Germany and some other countries for Czechs to be treated abroad if the health system can't handle them.

At a press briefing Friday, Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, voiced concern about the rising numbers and said they were being accompanied by rising hospital admissions, including to ICUs.

"We know of a number of cities across Europe where ICU capacity will be reached in the in the coming weeks," she said.

But Van Kerkhove added that advancements in treatment and increased testing capacity puts many countries in a better position than they were in a few months ago.

In Italy, Milan is the epicenter of the resurgence, and it is seeing its hospitals strained.

"We have a situation that reminds one quite distressingly of the one that we already have experienced," Galli of Milan's Sacco hospital told The Associated Press, referring to the peak in March and April when Italy hit its record of 969 deaths in one day. The country recorded 83 deaths on Thursday—twice previous days, but far off earlier levels.



People gather as they wait to board a tram, in Milan, Italy, Friday, Oct. 16, 2020. Italian health officials have declared the country in an "acute phase" after the country set records for new daily cases higher than even during the March-April peak, when the death toll surged well over 900 in one 24-hour period. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

Already in Milan, Galli said that the number of elderly patients or those with other risk factors is growing, indicating the virus has moved beyond its initial late September's expansion, when most of the cases were mild or asymptomatic caught by screening and contact tracing.

Since then, mixing among families, within companies, and among students outside of school has fueled the spread to more vulnerable people, he said, renewing pressure on Milan's hospitals.

"The trend is already there, and it is frankly alarming," he said, though he noted that not all of Italy was yet experiencing a surge.

But that, he said, might only be a matter of time. Galli said Italy "will follow in the footsteps" of its European neighbors unless the transmission chain is blocked in the next two weeks.

He urged more restrictions be imposed on public transport and leisure activities if authorities want to avoid another lockdown—bad both for the economy and the social fabric.

While Italy's lockdown in the spring bought it more time, Galli said the current resurgence shows "how quickly there is a risk of wasting the results of even a very decisive and very important intervention."

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