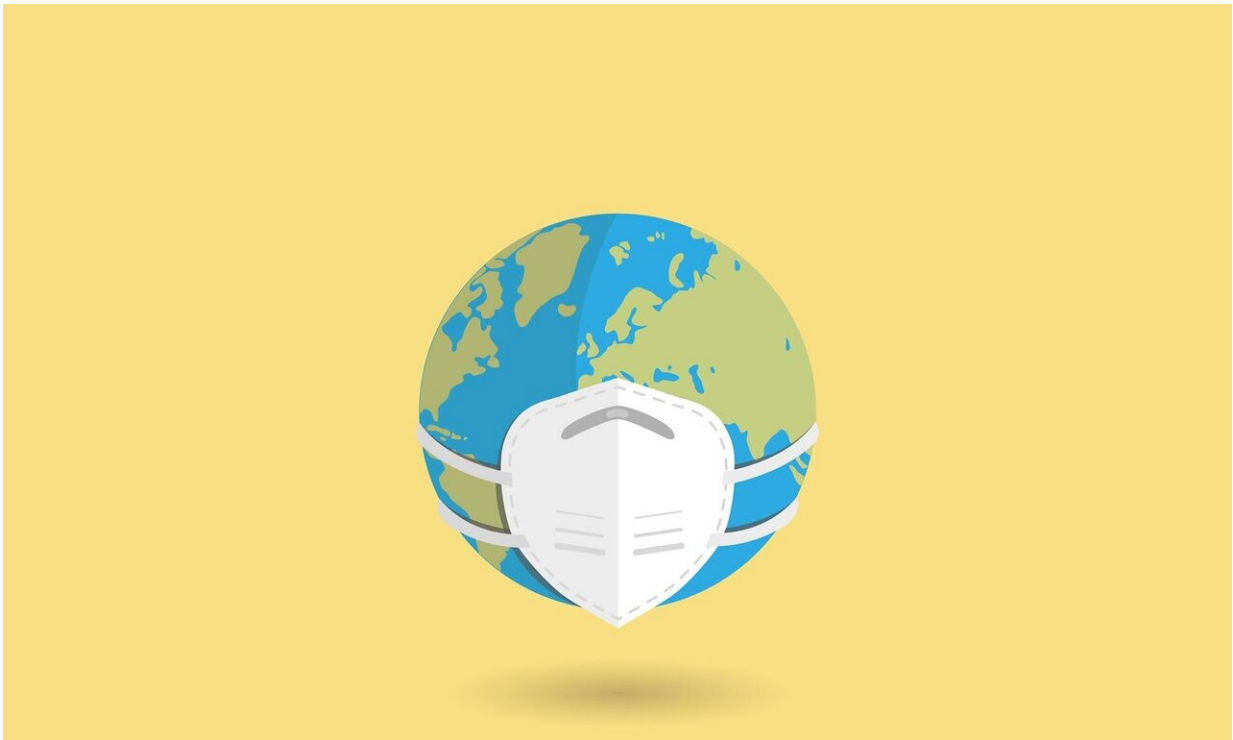


New York shuts early as global daily virus deaths top 10,000

November 13 2020



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Bars and restaurants in New York will shut early on Friday under fresh curbs designed to slow soaring virus infections as the number of daily deaths across the globe topped 10,000 for the first time since the pandemic began.

Cases are surging across the United States and Europe, with governments forced to take more drastic action despite fears about the devastation inflicted on their economies.

Across the planet the disease has now claimed almost 1.3 million lives and infected close to 53 million people since it first emerged in China in December.

In the United States, the country hardest hit by COVID-19, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered all establishments licensed to sell alcohol to close at 10 pm to help save hospitals from becoming overwhelmed.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said he was ready to follow the example of other big US cities and move schools to online only teaching because the daily infection rate was approaching three percent.

But it is even higher in other cities and parts of the United States and Europe are now recording more new virus cases than they had at the height of the first wave in March.

Tiny Lithuania claimed the unwanted title of becoming the nation where the pandemic is advancing the fastest with a 79 percent increase in infections over the past week. The number of cases also surged by 44 percent in the far bigger Brazil and by 58 percent in Japan.

'No more beds'

An AFP tally showed the world's daily death toll from the illness eclipsed 10,000 on Friday, while US infections remained above 125,000 a day.

The worrying trends forced Illinois Governor JB Pritzker to warn he may

have to issue stay-at-home orders for Chicago and the rest of the state if people continued to gather in public.

"With every fibre of my being I do not want us to get there," said Pritzker. "But right now that seems like where we are heading."

Chicago has issued a non-mandatory stay-at-home advisory because its hospitals serving the poorest communities are filling to breaking point.

Hospitals are also treating more patients in France than they during the first peak while Italy has seen the virus race down into its less developed south—largely spared when the virus came crashing down from China at the start of the year.

"We have almost no more beds available," Naples hospital doctor Rodolfo Punzi said.

'COVID fatigue'

The latest wave of restrictions come with policymakers worried about how they can persuade people who had only returned to some sort of normal life a few months ago to lose certain freedoms once again.

"COVID fatigue is definitely setting in," Newark mayor Ras Baraka said after imposing a nighttime curfew Thursday on his city on the edge of New York.

An Ifop survey in France showed 60 percent of respondents admitting to flouting rules at least once by making up a false excuse to go out or meeting up with family and friends.

Governments are also worried about how long curbs can last without devastating economies that had only just begun to stir back to life.

Capital Economics noted that French President Emmanuel Macron had promised last month to lift restrictions once new daily infection numbers fall from the current 30,000-40,000 to just 5,000.

"On that basis, if cases fall by the same rate now, France's lockdown could last for over two months," the consultancy said in a research note.

Santa's travel clause

Yet the news is not all gloom and doom.

Some economists believe that the world is slowly learning to work from home and that the hit of new restrictions will not be as severe on many industries this time around.

And US government scientist Anthony Fauci issued a tantalising hint Thursday that another vaccine is "literally on the threshold of being announced".

US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech announced Monday that their vaccine had proven 90 percent effective in preventing COVID-19 infections in Phase 3 trials involving more than 40,000 people.

"The cavalry is coming, but don't put your weapons down," Fauci told a conference by video link Thursday.

Most believe he was referring to Moderna—a US biotech firm focused on the same mRNA research as Pfizer and BioNTech.

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Friday he was encouraged by the rapid progress toward a vaccine.

But he added: "We must apply the same urgency and innovation to ensuring that all countries benefit from this scientific achievement."

Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte tried to lighten the mood by promising that Christmas will not be cancelled even if Europe's borders are shut.

"Father Christmas assured me that he already has an international travel certificate," Conte wrote on Facebook.

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Citation: New York shuts early as global daily virus deaths top 10,000 (2020, November 13)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-york-early-hospitals-europe.html>

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