

# Dutch hold mass coronavirus testing amid new variant fears

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Residents of Bergschenhoek, Netherlands, take part in a mass test of all of the municipality's 62,000 residents starting Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021, following a cluster of COVID-19 cases at an elementary school, including about 30 cases of the British coronavirus variant. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

Residents of a Dutch town filed into a sports hall Wednesday to take part

in the country's first mass coronavirus testing program, which aims to find out more about the spread of a new more transmissible coronavirus variant.

The makeshift testing center in Bergschenhoek, near the port city of Rotterdam, was set up after a cluster of COVID-19 cases linked to an elementary school turned up 30 cases of the new variant that is sweeping through Britain and Ireland, putting hospitals in those countries under severe strain.

Dr. Ewout Fanoy, with the local health authority, said the testing would provide data about how and how fast the new variant is spreading.

"Is it spreading from a child to an adult or an adult to a child? So we want to learn as much as possible and also to slow down the spread of this virus," he said.

On Tuesday night, as the Dutch government extended its current lockdown by three more weeks, Health Minister Hugo de Jonge said that only 2% to 5% of all COVID-19 cases in the Netherlands are now the new variant. But he added that "the expectation is that it will, just as in England, get the upper hand."

"The only question is how long that will take," De Jonge added. "And anybody who lets the dramatic images and stories from London sink in knows it can get much, much worse very quickly and we have to do whatever it takes to prevent that."



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Ernst Kuipers, head of a national organization that distributes patients among hospitals, warned lawmakers Wednesday of the gravity of the threat.

"If you get a transmission that goes as fast as in England, then there is no care system, not in Germany, not in England and not in the Netherlands either, that can cope," he said.

Bergschenhoek residents played their part as a steady stream of

people—from elderly men and women to young families with babies—went to get tested. The municipality of Lansingerland, which includes the town and other nearby villages, wants to test all of its 62,000 residents aged over two years in coming days.

Marjan Daals, who went for a test with her husband, Frans, said she wasn't afraid of the new variant, "but I am taking extra precautions. Now we were asked to take a test and I am doing that gladly."



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Residents of Bergschenhoek, Netherlands, register as they take part in a mass test of all of the municipality's 62,000 residents starting Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021, following a cluster of COVID-19 cases at an elementary school, including about 30 cases of the British coronavirus variant. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)



A health care worker disinfects her hands as residents of Bergschenhoek, Netherlands, take part in a mass test of all of the municipality's 62,000 inhabitants starting Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021, following a cluster of COVID-19 cases at an elementary school, including about 30 cases of the British coronavirus variant. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

The testing came the morning after Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte extended his country's tough five-week lockdown amid concerns that infection rates are not falling quickly enough and fears about the new more transmissible variant.

Under the lockdown, all schools and nonessential shops are closed, along with public venues such as cinemas, museums and libraries. There also are strict limits on the size of gatherings both indoors and outside.

"Almost everybody will understand that there was no other choice, because numbers are not falling fast enough and we are now also have to face the threat of the British virus variant," Rutte said.

Confirmed new COVID-19 infections in the Netherlands over the last week fell 12% to 49,398, the Dutch public health institute said Tuesday. Hospital admissions for virus patients fell 18% and new COVID-19 patients in intensive care units declined by 12%.

The overall Dutch death toll from COVID-19 now stands at more than 12,500.

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