

Portugal sets records in one of world's worst virus surges

January 20 2021, by Barry Hatton



A woman buys food at the door of a pastry shop in Lisbon, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. The pandemic has gained momentum in Portugal since Christmas, when restrictions on gatherings and movement were eased for four days. Restaurants and cafes are only allowed to serve food for takeaway. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Portugal's new daily COVID-19 cases jumped to more than 14,600 to set a new national record Wednesday, as the country weathers one of the worst pandemic surges in the world.

Health authorities officially reported 14,647 new infections—about 3,600 more than the previous daily record set four days ago.

The surge shows no sign of easing, with the government and health experts predicting it will peak next week.

The number of COVID-19 patients in hospital and in intensive care also rose to new record highs, with 5,493 and 681, respectively.

"The gravity of the situation is clear for everyone to see," Health Minister Marta Temido told reporters.

The public and private health sectors and the military are all collaborating to meet needs, she said, but added that "resources are finite."

The pandemic has gained momentum in Portugal since Christmas, when restrictions on gatherings and movement were eased for four days.

Portugal has the highest seven-day average rate in the world of new cases per 100,000 population and the second-highest rate of new deaths, according to data collated through Tuesday by Johns Hopkins University.

Overall, the country of 10.3 million people has 581,605 confirmed cases, and 9,465 confirmed deaths.

In another worry for Portuguese authorities, a study by the country's leading disease control agency said a new variant of the virus first identified in southeast England could represent 60% of new COVID-19

cases in Portugal within two weeks.



Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa drinks during a joint news conference with European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen and European Parliament President David Sassoli after a plenary session at the European Parliament in Brussels, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021. During the session Costa presented the main lines of the programme of activities of the Portuguese Presidency. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)

The study by the Dr. Ricardo Jorge National Institute of Health, based on data collected since Dec. 1, was published Tuesday.

The surge is pushing the public health system, especially hospitals, to the

limit of its capacity, and the government is scrambling to keep pace.

The assistant secretary of state for health, António Lacerda Sales, said the system is at full stretch.

"We are doing everything in our power to increase the system's capacity," he told reporters.

A field hospital with 58 beds was due to open later Wednesday in the capital, on the grounds of the Lisbon University campus.

To further relieve pressure on hospitals, authorities are opening more temporary medical installations at sites outside the health sector.

The government said Wednesday facilities in such places as hotels, university residences and church premises will soon have 2,300 beds where patients can be kept under observation.

Meanwhile, authorities launched a program of rapid COVID-19 tests at schools in hardest-hit areas amid a severe surge in cases.

Portugal is in lockdown, but the government is reluctant to close schools. It says that if schools close there are children who won't get proper meals, who have no computer, no access to the Internet, and who don't have their own room at home and get no help with their studies.

Some teachers are unhappy about the policy, however, and are pressing for a national school closure.

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