

Iceland introduces restrictions after UK variant is detected

March 25 2021, by Egill Bjarnason



A woman takes a photo as lava flows from an eruption of a volcano on the Reykjanes Peninsula in southwestern Iceland on Tuesday, March 23, 2021. Iceland's latest volcano eruption is quickly attracting crowds of people hoping to get close to the gentle lava flows. The eruption in Geldingadalur, near Iceland's capital Reykjavik, is not seen as a threat to nearby towns and the slow flows mean people can get close to action without too much harm. (AP Photo/Marco Di Marco)

Gym classes, happy hours and the near-normal life enjoyed so far by the people of Iceland ended abruptly on Thursday, when the government ordered new restrictions after detecting six coronavirus cases believed to be the variant first found in Britain.

Authorities ordered all schools closed, as well as gyms, pools, theaters, cinemas and bars. Restaurants, shops and hairdressers can remain open in a limited capacity. Gatherings of more than 10 people will be banned for three weeks.

"We need to hit the brake," Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir said Thursday.

Iceland has had just 5,384 cases and 29 deaths from COVID-19, according to official figures. But in the past week, six people were infected with the British variant, which authorities say is more transmissible among young people.

"This variant seems to spread faster among children than we have previously experienced," the prime minister added, referring to recent reported cases in schools in the capital Reykjavík. A student and a teacher at a Reykjavik school were among the six people diagnosed with the British variant.

Authorities believe the six people infected with the more contagious variant may have infected some 22 others before they were diagnosed and instructed to quarantine.

A study published in Norway this week by the National Institute of Public Health suggested that people infected with the U.K. variant are 2.6 times more likely to be hospitalized. The study also suggested that young people and adults under 40 are more vulnerable to the variant.



Lava flows from an eruption of a volcano on the Reykjanes Peninsula in southwestern Iceland on Tuesday, March 23, 2021. Iceland's latest volcano eruption is quickly attracting crowds of people hoping to get close to the gentle lava flows. The eruption in Geldingadalur, near Iceland's capital Reykjavik, is not seen as a threat to nearby towns and the slow flows mean people can get close to action without too much harm. (AP Photo/Marco Di Marco)

Iceland had kept schools open for children under 16 since the start of the pandemic. The government now expects students to stay home past the Easter holidays.

Haukur Tryggvason, the owner of a live music venue in the northern town of Akureyri, said the restrictions dashed hopes of a big Easter

event. Musicians at the venue had been allowed to perform for a masked crowd of up to 50 people.

The town, a popular winter sports getaway, has experienced an increase in domestic visitors to help make up for the absence of international tourists.

"Easter weekend was set to be a big break," Tryggvason said. "I was completely sold out."

Tighter virus restrictions were the second big event to rock the Atlantic Ocean island nation in the last week. A long-dormant volcano in southwestern Iceland flared to life on March 19 on Reykjanes Peninsula, near the capital of Reykjavik. It was the area's first volcanic eruption in nearly 800 years.

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