

Portugal begins gradual easing of lockdown

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Portugal on Monday began easing some of the lockdown restrictions in place since mid-January, reopening nurseries and primary schools, hair salons and bookshops, but insisted on the need to move cautiously in order to avoid a new spike in coronavirus infections.

"Today, we are beginning the first phase of lifting the lockdown, but it must be very cautious and gradual," Prime Minister Antonio Costa tweeted.

And that meant "not going out and doing everything we want to as if we were not in the middle of a grave pandemic," Costa said.

"We cannot take risks and lose everything."

After Portugal's hospitals were overwhelmed by an explosion in Covid-19 cases following the Christmas and New Year celebrations, the government imposed a second general lockdown and closed schools a week later.

But on Monday, after nearly two months of school closures, children below the age of nine were allowed to return to the classroom.

The reopening of schools is "extremely important for (children's) future, because at home, in front of the computer, they don't learn a lot," said one mother, Jessica Madalena, as she dropped off her two children at a primary school in Amadora, west of Lisbon.

In tandem with the gradual reopening, the government is banking on mass testing at schools, with teachers and staff designated priority groups for vaccination.

"Vaccination should begin this weekend, March 20 and 21," health minister Tiago Brandao Rodrigues told Antena 1 radio, referring to the inoculation of teachers and [school](#) staff.

Under the gradual easing of restrictions, people are still being asked not to go out until after the Easter weekend (April 3-4) when more schools, terraces, public monuments and museums will be reopened.

Universities, theatres and [concert halls](#) will then reopen from mid-April, followed by restaurants and sports facilities from the beginning of May.

After peaking at 13,000 daily cases at the end of January, the average daily number of infections over a seven-day period in Portugal fell below 600 on Sunday for the first time since mid-September.

And the number of people who have been hospitalised fell below 1,000 this weekend for the first time since mid-October.

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