

Dutch coronavirus infections rise ahead of lockdown easing

April 22 2021, by Mike Corder



In this file photo dated Thursday, April 1, 2021, Dutch caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte listens to a debate in parliament in The Hague, Netherlands. Rutte announced a significant easing in his country's months-long coronavirus lockdown Tuesday April 20, 2021, calling it a delicate balancing act as infections remain stubbornly high, and as lockdown fatigue grows.(AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

Dutch caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte on Thursday defended his decision to ease his country's lockdown next week even after the Netherlands recorded 9,648 new coronavirus infections— the highest daily increase since January.

The national care authority also said the country's high numbers of COVID-19 patients mean that more than one-third of Dutch hospitals no longer have the capacity to carry out planned [critical care](#) and nearly all hospitals are delaying less urgent medical procedures.

"The COVID number in ICUs is high and on a rising trend," the National Coordination Center for Patient Distribution said. The number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care units rose by 17 to 839 over the last day.

Still, the nation is preparing to ease its lockdown next week.

Rutte announced Tuesday that the nationwide 10:30 p.m.-4:30 a.m. curfew in force since January will end on April 28, when bars and restaurants will be allowed to reopen outdoor terraces—under strict conditions—from noon until 6 p.m.

Shoppers will no longer have to make appointments to visit nonessential stores, although the number of customers per shop will still be tightly limited.

Rutte told a parliamentary debate Thursday that his government is prepared to take an "acceptable risk" by easing restrictions because modelling shows a decline in infections and hospital admissions is likely around the start of May.

"This also has to do with the broader social evaluation and we believe that is a responsible risk," he said.

Bars and other hospitality venues have been closed since mid-October and have for weeks been pressing to reopen.

In the Parliament debate, opposition Labor Party leader Lilianne Ploumen urged the government to call off the relaxation of rules.

The 7-day rolling average of daily new cases in Netherlands rose over the past two weeks from 40.8 new cases per 100,000 people on April 7 to 47.9 new cases per 100,000 people on April 21. The Netherlands has seen over 17,000 confirmed virus deaths in the pandemic.

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