

Balancing act: Dutch PM eases lockdown amid infection rise

April 20 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 announced a significant easing in his country's months-long coronavirus lockdown Tuesday, calling it a delicate balancing act as infections remain stubbornly high.

The decision to cautiously relax restrictions reflects difficult choices being made in many countries as lockdown fatigue grows even as positive cases keep rising.

Earlier in the day, the country's public health institute said that the number of people who tested positive over the last week rose by 5.3% to nearly 54,000. The institute said that the pressure on hospitals and other [medical professionals](#) "remains high."

Even so, Rutte he was taking "a careful step" to ease the lockdown because of predictions that the infection curve is flattening and modeling shows that a decline in hospital occupancy is approaching.

"We really see the tension between the grim reality in the here and now in the hospitals and at the same time that cautious, optimistic outlook," Rutte said. "That tension is very great for the time being and yet we dare to take this first step now. A step that is still very cautious and careful, because we can afford very few setbacks."

A nationwide 10:30 p.m.-4:30 a.m. curfew will be lifted April 28. On the same date, bars and cafes will be allowed to reopen their outdoor terraces from noon until 6 p.m.—under strict conditions—for the first time since mid-October.



In this file photo dated Wednesday, March 17, 2021, Dutch caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte answers questions after casting his vote in a general election in The Hague. 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, FILE)



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Nonessential shops also were allowed to reopen, with strict limits on the number of customers. The stores have been partially open for weeks, but only to shoppers who first make an appointment online. Appointments will no longer be needed.

A limit on people having only one visitor to their home per day was eased—two visitors will now be allowed.

Schools were reopened earlier this year. Rutte said Tuesday that students at universities and colleges will be allowed from Monday to be physically present for one day of classes each week.

In a boost for the country's vaccination campaign, Health Minister Hugo de Jonge said the Netherlands would start using the [Johnson & Johnson vaccine](#) on Wednesday after the European Union medicines regulator said its benefits outweigh risks. The agency's experts came to the conclusion after finding a "possible link" between the shot and extremely rare blood clots and recommending a warning be added to the label.

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Citation: Balancing act: Dutch PM eases lockdown amid infection rise (2021, April 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-04-dutch-pm-eases-lockdown-infection.html>

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