

France eases mask rules; will end nightly virus curfew

June 16 2021, by Sylvie Corbet



In this June 6, 2021 file photo, a woman dances by a cafe terrace in Lille, northern France. France is lifting mandatory mask-wearing outdoors and will halt an eight-month nightly coronavirus curfew on June 20. Credit: AP Photo/Michel Spingler, File

France on Wednesday eased several COVID-19 restrictions, with authorities saying it's no longer always mandatory to wear masks outdoors, and halting an 8-month nightly coronavirus curfew this weekend.

The surprise announcement by French Prime Minister Jean Castex comes as France is registering about 3,900 new virus infections a day, down from 35,000 in the March-April peak.

Castex welcomed the "very good news" and said the curfew will be lifted on Sunday, 10 days earlier than expected. The decision was made at a government meeting focusing on the virus situation on Wednesday morning.

"It's actually improving more rapidly than we had hoped for," Castex said. "My dear fellow citizens, I say it, I feel it: we are experiencing an important moment, a happy moment of return to a form of normal life again."

Wearing a mask will still remain mandatory outdoors in crowded places like street markets and stadiums, he said. People are required to wear a mask indoors in public spaces, including at work—with an exception for restaurants and bars.

"We have not known such a low level of virus spreading since last August," Castex said, adding that the situation was improving in all of France's regions.

"Those positive evolutions are due to the mobilization of the French and to the vaccination campaign," he said.



In this March 29, 2021 file photo, A man walks with a face mask to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, as a man takes a snapshot of the sunset, in Paris. France is lifting mandatory mask-wearing outdoors and will halt an eight-month nightly coronavirus curfew on June 20. Credit: AP Photo/Thibault Camus, File

Over 58% of France's adult population has received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose. On Tuesday, the European Union nation opened its vaccination programs to those 12 to 18 as part of a push to protect residents as restrictions are gradually being lifted.

Lots of Parisians were enjoying Wednesday the shade of the trees in the capital's parks as the temperature reached 33 degrees Celsius (91 degrees Fahrenheit). Many had already removed their masks.

"What a relief!" said Elisabeth Sacco. "It's too hot, I could not stand keeping (the mask) on any more... It makes me feel joy and a sense of freedom."

"I was not convinced it was useful anyway when we're outside with not many people around," she added.

Stephanie Durant, a mother of two, said the lifting of the curfew will enable her family to go to the countryside in Normandy, western France, as soon as this weekend. "Before, the curfew was too early to allow us to come back on Sunday evening," she said.



Teddy bears, set up by Philippe Labourel, who wants to be named 'Le papa des nounours' (Teddy Bears father) are pictured inside American vintage cars driving through Paris, Sunday, June, 13, 2021. The event took place in a show of support

for the tourism industry which was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Lewis Joly



Teddy bears, set up by Philippe Labourel, who wants to be named 'Le papa des nounours' (Teddy Bears father) are pictured inside American vintage cars driving through Paris, Sunday, June, 13, 2021. The event took place in a show of support for the tourism industry which was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Lewis Joly



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The French have been living under night-time curfews since mid-October. When the numbers of infections were at their highest level from mid-January to mid-May, the curfew was from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., with shops closed down and exceptions only for workers and quick walks for pets. It had been gradually pushed back to start at 11 p.m.

Terraces at restaurants and cafes, theaters, cinemas and museums all reopened on May 19. Last week, France reopened indoor spaces in

restaurants and cafes as well as gyms and swimming pools—and officially welcomed back tourists from the United States and elsewhere if they are vaccinated with one of the four EU-approved vaccines.

Major sports and cultural events can have a maximum of 5,000 people, and all need to show a vaccination certificate or a negative test within the last 48 hours.

The nation has reported 110,563 confirmed virus deaths, one of the highest tolls in Europe.

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Citation: France eases mask rules; will end nightly virus curfew (2021, June 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-06-france-mandatory-outdoor-masks-covid.html>

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