

Dutch ICU boss calls for tough lockdown to rein in virus

November 24 2021, by Mike Corder



Commuters and tourists, some wearing face mask, take a free ferry across IJ river to Amsterdam North, Netherlands, Friday, Nov. 19, 2021. The Dutch government announced Tuesday Nov. 23, 2021, that it is making social distancing mandatory again for all adults Wednesday after coronavirus infection numbers hit a new weekly record Tuesday, climbing 39% while hospital and intensive care unit admissions also rose sharply. Credit: AP Photo/Peter Dejong

Social distancing became mandatory again across the Netherlands on Wednesday as coronavirus infections soared and the country's leading intensive care physician called for even tougher measures to rein in the pandemic.

Health Minister Hugo de Jonge said that a press conference on coronavirus measures that had been scheduled for Dec. 3 has been moved forward to Friday.

"The picture is somber and worrying," De Jonge told reporters in The Hague.

The Netherlands is in the midst of a surge that has seen a string of new daily records for numbers of coronavirus infections in recent weeks. The country's public health institute last week recorded a 39% spike in infections and said hospital and intensive care unit admissions also rose.

"The turnaround that we want to—have to—see this week ... to ensure that pressure on the healthcare system doesn't get too high, has to come soon otherwise we will have to force it," De Jonge said.

The government has asked for advice from a panel of experts and "hopes to make decisions Friday," De Jonge said.

The head of the national association of intensive care units, Diederik Gommers, appealed Tuesday night for a tough lockdown, including closing schools, something the government has been keen to avoid.



A woman and two children commute in Amsterdam, Netherlands, Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2021. The government urged people to stick better to basic coronavirus prevention rules such as social distancing, mask wearing and working from home whenever possible. Weekly numbers showed that the most new infections last week were among children. Credit: AP Photo/Peter Dejong

Gommers told a committee of lawmakers that the country's hospitals are 10 days away from being so overburdened with COVID-19 patients that intensive care doctors will have to start making choices about which critically ill patients get care.

There are currently around 500 COVID-19 patients in Dutch ICUs, which have an overall capacity of 1,066, according to an organization that distributes patients between hospitals. Gommers said the number of

beds could be scaled up to a maximum of 1,200 to 1,250 and that around 50 COVID-19 patients are entering ICUs each day.

He said that the government's target of 1,350 beds is out of reach because many ICU staff are currently off work, either sick or because they have children who tested positive and have to self isolate.

He said the only way to ease pressure on ICUs is "to ensure that the admissions go down very fast. And the fastest way of reducing (admissions) is tough measures and I think that means a strict lockdown. And that includes schools because I think if you don't close schools you don't stop infections."

Figures show that children aged from 5 to 11 years had the highest rates of infection over the last week in the Netherlands. The Netherlands and the rest of Europe are awaiting a decision from the European Union's drugs regulator on a request by Pfizer to approve its COVID-19 vaccine for elementary school-age children.

The Dutch government—which has been in caretaker mode amid drawn-out coalition talks since a March 17 election—put the nation in a partial lockdown from Nov. 13, ordering bars, restaurants and supermarkets to close at 8 p.m. Non-essential shops have to close at 6 p.m. and people were urged to work from home.

The government made social distancing mandatory Wednesday for everybody aged 18 years and over in locations where the country's COVID passes are not required. Social distancing—staying 1.5 meters from people not in one's family—was already strongly advised by the government. Making it mandatory means law enforcement officials can fine people who do not comply.

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Citation: Dutch ICU boss calls for tough lockdown to rein in virus (2021, November 24)
retrieved 21 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-11-dutch-icu-boss-tough-lockdown.html>

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