

Dutch extend COVID lockdown; school holidays to start early

December 14 2021, by Mike Corder



Netherlands' Prime Minister Mark Rutte speaks during a press conference after a meeting with his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama, in Tirana, Albania, Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021. The Dutch government on Tuesday Dec. 14, 2021, ordered elementary schools to close a week early for Christmas holidays as authorities battle to rein in coronavirus infections amid concerns about the swift spread of the new omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Franc Zhurda, File

The Dutch government on Tuesday ordered elementary schools to close a week early for Christmas holidays as authorities battle to rein in coronavirus infections amid concerns about the swift spread of the new omicron variant.

Caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte also extended the country's existing lockdown until Jan. 14, saying the government has to be alert for the new variant.

"That is of course not the good news you hope for at Christmas time," Rutte said in a nationally televised news conference. "So yes, a disappointing but perhaps not very big surprise."

Rutte said school holidays will be extended from two weeks to three, starting Dec. 20. Young children registered the steepest rises in infections in a recent coronavirus surge in the Netherlands.

That surge has ebbed slightly since lockdown measures were introduced last month. Bars, restaurants and other public meeting places such as theaters and cinemas have been shutting their doors at 5 p.m. since Nov. 28 and will now have to continue through the holiday season.

Rutte said that continuing [high pressure](#) on the [health care system](#) combined with the looming threat of the omicron variant made measures unavoidable.

"We still don't know much about it, but this new variant is spreading considerably faster than the current delta variant," he said.

Earlier Tuesday, the country's public health institute in its weekly coronavirus update said that positive tests declined by 21% over the past week to 116,477. Hospital admissions were down 10% and intensive care units edged lower by 4%.

However, the institute warned that the omicron variant is expected to cause more infections and could in turn lead to an increase in [hospital admissions](#).

Health Minister Hugo de Jonge said the country's booster campaign will be accelerated so that every adult who wants a booster shot will be able to get one by the second half of January.

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