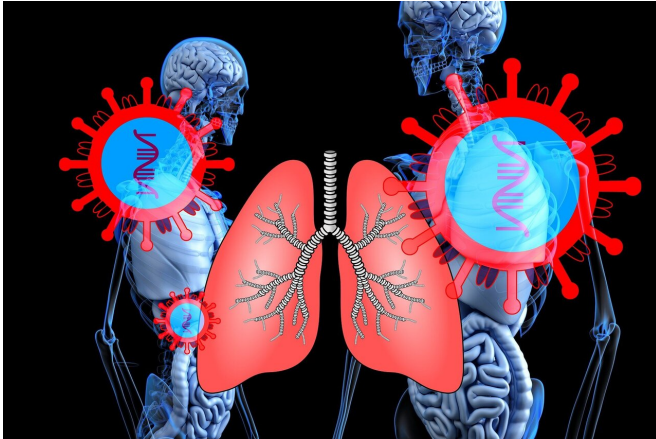


Mexico raises health emergency level as virus cases mount

21 April 2020



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Mexico raised its health emergency level following a rapid increase in coronavirus cases and amid fears the health system could collapse, the government said Tuesday.

Health Undersecretary Hugo Lopez-Gatell said the country was moving to "phase three" of its response to the deadly pandemic.

"We're in a phase of rapid increase, where we're accumulating a large number of infections (and) hospital admissions," he said.

The government has suspended all non-essential economic activity until May 30 and asked people to stay at home and practice social distancing, although it has not enforced a mandatory quarantine.

By Monday, Mexico had recorded close to 8,800 cases and 712 deaths from COVID-19. The government expects the peak of infections to hit between May 8 and 10.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has been

widely criticized for his response to the pandemic, taking much longer than other countries in the region to impose lockdown measures.

Last month, Human Rights Watch accused Lopez Obrador of setting a "profoundly dangerous example that threatens Mexicans' health" by flouting social distancing guidelines and continuing to hold rallies and greet supporters with handshakes and hugs."

"This epidemic is accelerating, which means there is an increasing number of cases every day and that also applies to geographical spread," said Lopez-Gatell, who accompanied Lopez Obrador at the president's daily press briefing.

Areas that successfully contain the spread of the [coronavirus](#) will be allowed to lift [social distancing](#) measures on May 17, the [health ministry](#) said.

Also on Tuesday, Mexico's central bank cut its interbank interest rate by 50 points to 6.0 percent, in a surprise move.

"Initial estimates suggest that first semester 2020 GDP could present a reduction of more than five percent compared to the same period of the previous year," said the central bank.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) has predicted the region will experience its worst-ever recession due to the pandemic.

CEPAL predicted Mexico's GDP would fall by 6.5 percent in 2020.

In 2019, Lopez Obrador's first full year in office, Mexico suffered its first economic contraction, of 0.1 percent, in a decade.

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