

Czech daily virus cases hit new record

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The Czech Republic registered a record high of 3,130 coronavirus cases on Thursday, almost matching the total for the whole of March, health ministry data showed on Friday.

It was the third straight daily record for the EU member of 10.7 million people, which has registered 44,155 infections and 489 deaths since the March outbreak.

And it matches a pattern across Europe of a surge in cases since August that has seen many countries move back towards tougher restrictions.

Data cited by the Czech News Agency (CTK) show the country is now the second worst-off in the EU after Spain in terms of daily growth in cases per 100,000 inhabitants.

Most of the patients have mild or no symptoms and only 413 people are currently in hospital.

But epidemiologist Roman Prymula, a government coordinator, said on Sunday the growth was "explosive" and risked pushing hospital capacity "to the very limit".

Ladislav Dusek, head of the Czech Institute of Health Information and Statistics, said on Thursday the epidemic was no longer spreading within closed clusters.

"We are facing a big risk of an exponential spread," Dusek said.

The government has meanwhile closed bars and clubs between midnight and 6:00 am and introduced face masks in classrooms for pupils and students aged over 11.

It already reintroduced mandatory masks on public transport and in hospitals on September 1, before extending the measure to most indoor areas including shops and restaurants on September 10.

Prague mayor Zdenek Hrib said Friday the capital's universities would close next week and switch to distance learning, without giving the exact date.

Also on Friday, the government said it would re-establish its crisis staff as of Monday to coordinate activities designed to stem the virus spread.

The recent spike has seen the Czech Republic cut from the so-called "safe countries" lists several fellow EU countries.

After fending off much of the pandemic with timely steps including mandatory face masks outdoors in the spring, the government lifted most measures before the summer holidays.

"Maybe we should have kept face masks on throughout the summer," populist billionaire Prime Minister Andrej Babis said Thursday, adding: "We just wanted life to return to normal."

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