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Belgium looks to schools as COVID third wave rises

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A surge in new coronavirus infections and hospital admissions in Belgium has made it necessary to "tighten the screws" on restrictions, especially at schools, ministers said on Friday.

Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke said anti-COVID measures had to be followed to meet the government's two main objectives: a full return of secondary school students after the Easter break on April 19 and the reopening of bars and restaurants from May 1.

However, the government on Friday resisted imposing more drastic measures seen in France, Italy and other European nations also fighting the third wave of the virus.

In Belgium, masks will now be compulsory in the last two grades of primary school— for children aged 10 and 11, compared to a threshold of 12 years old until now.

In addition, previously announced plans to further loosen restrictions on outside activities and open amusement parks have been dropped.

The country with a population of 11.5 million, where the pandemic has killed more than 22,600 people, there were some 5,200 new infections on Monday alone, according to official figures.

In the past week, the daily average of new infections—nearly 3,300—has jumped 34 percent from the previous seven days, which is "considerable," a health authority spokesman said.

The number of COVID patients admitted to intensive care (543 on Friday) has almost doubled in a month, to a level not seen in 2021.

"It is possible (to achieve these goals), provided we tighten the screws now," Vandenbroucke said.

"We need to drastically reduce contact and mobility," he added, calling on employers to better enforce working from home.

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said the biggest factor in new contaminations came from the workplace and schools, where new variants of the virus were infecting more young people.

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