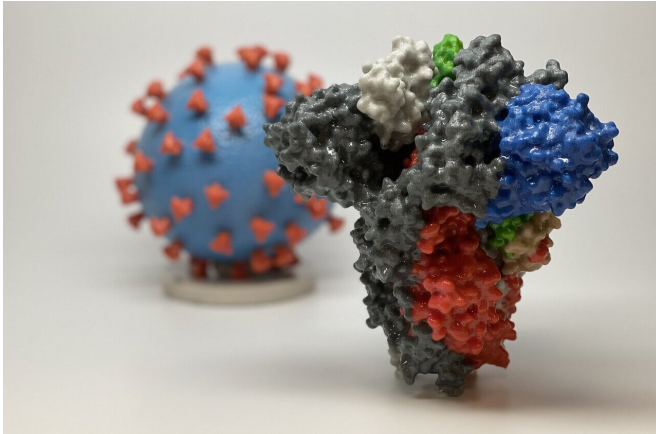


UK closes schools as coronavirus deaths rise

18 March 2020



3D print of a spike protein of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19--in front of a 3D print of a SARS-CoV-2 virus particle. The spike protein (foreground) enables the virus to enter and infect human cells. On the virus model, the virus surface (blue) is covered with spike proteins (red) that enable the virus to enter and infect human cells. Credit: NIH

Britain announced Wednesday it would be closing schools in the coming days to stem the spread of coronavirus, as the death toll topped 100 and Londoners braced for tougher measures to tackle the outbreak.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson had held off following the lead of other European countries in shutting schools, because of the impact it would have on the workforce.

But as the outbreak spreads and the [death toll](#) reached 104, up from 71 in a day, he said schools would be closed indefinitely later this week.

"After schools shut their gates from Friday afternoon, they will remain closed," he told his daily news conference, without giving a date for their re-opening.

Exceptions will be made for key workers—including healthcare staff, police and delivery drivers—and for the most [vulnerable children](#).

Johnson earlier this week advised people to work from home and avoid unnecessary social contact and travel, warning the infection rate was starting to spike.

On Wednesday he said this was having an effect but repeated advice for people with symptoms to self-isolate for between one and two weeks, depending on circumstances.

"Everyone must follow the advice to protect themselves and their families, but also, more importantly to protect the wider public," he said.

Johnson added that "we will not hesitate to bring forward further and faster measures."

Speculation is rife that London in particular could soon be subject to more draconian measures, as the capital records the most number of cases.

"We know London is ahead of the rest of us so we may see more stringent measures than even those that we have announced so far being taken," Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said in Edinburgh earlier.

The government will on Thursday introduce legislation giving it emergency powers to deal with the outbreak, including to close premises and restrict gatherings.

Parliamentary hotspot

Lawmakers were earlier told to stay away from Johnson's weekly question time in parliament amid warnings that Westminster is a particularly infectious area.

Some 25 MPs, including a cabinet minister, are

already thought to have isolated themselves.

"There's a lot of COVID-19 in Westminster," tweeted epidemiologist Professor Neil Ferguson, a government adviser, as he announced that he had also developed symptoms.

MPs will gather on Thursday however to debate new emergency legislation to deal with the [coronavirus](#) outbreak, which ministers hope to push through within days.

The government says its powers will only be used when "absolutely necessary" and the bill has support from opposition parties.

But some MPs voiced concern at the sweeping nature and duration of the proposals, and the effect on civil liberties.

Rent support

Johnson's government has come under pressure to do more to tackle the outbreak of COVID-19, given the tough lockdowns imposed in other European countries.

But he insisted all action was driven by the science, adding: "We're going to do the right measures at the right time."

So far Britain has around 2,600 cases, but chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance this week warned that 55,000 Britons could have the virus at a "reasonable" estimate.

The new social distancing advice sparked warnings that many businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry, could go bust.

The FTSE 100 slumped again Wednesday, dropping as much as 5.0 percent in morning trade, while the pound hit its lowest level since 1985 against the dollar, touching \$1.1828.

Finance minister Rishi Sunak on Tuesday announced a package of support for businesses, including government-backed loans of at least £330 billion (\$395 billion, 360 billion euros).

On Wednesday, Johnson also promised legislation to protect individuals unable to pay their rent because of job losses caused by the crisis to avoid evictions.

In other developments:

- the government said it was working to increase the number of people in hospital being tested for COVID-19 to 25,000 a day and ensure frontline health workers get the protective kit they need.

- Johnson said there was a "massive effort" to build enough ventilators to treat the worst-hit patients, after concern about a shortage.

- Supermarkets, whose supplies have been hit by panic-buying, said they would safeguard supplies for the elderly and most vulnerable, including dedicated opening times only for older customers.

- the 50th Glastonbury music festival became the latest casualty of the outbreak, with this year's event pushed back to next year.

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