

Ambulances queue at hospitals as virus surge slams Portugal

22 January 2021, by Helena Alves and Barry Hatton



A young woman wearing a face mask enters a subway station in Lisbon, Friday, Jan. 22, 2021. Portugal's COVID-19 surge is continuing unabated, with a new record of daily deaths, hospitalizations and patients in intensive care. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Ambulances waiting to deliver COVID-19 patients queued outside hospital emergency departments Friday as Portugal's COVID-19 surge continued unabated, adding a new record of daily deaths for the fifth day in a row.

The number of COVID-19 hospitalizations and patients in intensive care also reached new highs over the previous 24 hours, placing the [public health system](#) under severe strain, health authorities said.

Authorities reported 234 deaths, bringing the total in the country of 10.3 million to 9,920.

Hospitals added another 149 COVID-19 patients to their wards, with another 13 in ICUs. Hospital COVID-19 wards and ICUs are on average around 90% full.

The almost 14,000 officially reported new cases

was the second highest number during the pandemic.

Portugal has the highest seven-day average rate in the world of new cases per 100,000 population and the highest rate of new deaths, according to data collated through Thursday by Johns Hopkins University.

At Lisbon's Santa Maria Hospital, the capital's largest, more than a dozen ambulances queued along an approach road, waiting to hand over their COVID-19 patients to medics. At some hospitals, ambulance drivers have complained about waiting for hours.

At Santa Maria, the hospital's head of the COVID-19 emergency response, Anabela Oliveira, said staff were working under "brutal pressure."



A woman wearing a face mask walks past the closed Camoes high school in Lisbon, Friday, Jan. 22, 2021. Portugal's government has ordered the closure of the country's schools for two weeks amid a surge in COVID-19 cases. The country's prime minister blames the surge on a more contagious variant of the new coronavirus. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

She said the hospital has also been receiving overflow patients from other hospitals in the region.

"The public health service will collapse if these numbers keep coming, if we remain under this pressure," she told reporters outside the hospital. "This is the most critical moment of the pandemic."

Officials said doctors were checking the needs of patients in the ambulances, to see whether they were urgent cases, and that the [hospital](#) was close to its limit.

Portugal's government blames the surge on the appearance of a more contagious variant first identified in southeast England. As a result, it is stopping flights to and from the United Kingdom from Saturday.

The move came a week after the British government halted flights to and from Portugal in an effort to prevent a variant found in Brazil from reaching the U.K.. The Portuguese government labelled that decision "absurd."

Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa announced after a video summit of European Union leaders late Thursday that only repatriation flights for citizens wanting to return home would be allowed between Portugal and the U.K..

Tens of thousands of Britons, often retirees, reside in Portugal, while hundreds of thousands of Portuguese have gone to work in Britain in recent years.

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