

Italy bets on virus measures now for relief later

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Italy's health minister said Sunday the government hoped new coronavirus restrictions imposed on three quarters of the country would allow a relaxation of measures in the second half of spring.

Roberto Speranza comments in Sunday's La Repubblica newspaper came on the eve of restrictions taking effect from Monday and running until April 6, which would cover the crucial Easter holiday period.

"The implementation of more stringent measures and the gradual increase in the number of people vaccinated make us think we will have improving figures by the second half of spring already," he said.

The new factor had been the recent mutations of the original virus, particularly the one identified in England, which now accounted for more than half the cases.

But he added: "Each dose of [vaccine](#) injected is a step in the direction of the way out of the crisis."

And although several countries have suspended the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine because of concerns over [side-effects](#), Speranza expressed his confidence in Italian and European health

authorities, both of which say it is safe to use.

Schools, restaurants, shops and museums will close across most of Italy on Monday, a year after it became the first European country to face a major outbreak.

Prime Minister Mario Draghi said Friday the surge in infections was fuelled by the new, more contagious variants.

Most regions—including those containing Rome and Milan—become high-risk red zones, with all residents told to stay home except for work, health or other essential reasons.

The restrictions cover 48 million people and will last until Easter—then during the Easter weekend of April 3-5, the whole of Italy will become a red zone.

Italy has to date suffered more than 101,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

In the northern region of Piedmont meanwhile, the health authority briefly suspended the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine Sunday after the death of a teacher who had received it the day before.

The woman teacher, whose age has not been disclosed, died Sunday at Biella, a town north of Turin.

A statement on regional health authority's website said vaccination had resumed "after a precautionary suspension of a few hours aimed at locating and isolating the batch from which originated the dose injected into the deceased teacher".

All other batches could be used except that one, pending a meeting of the health authorities, the statement added.

Already on Thursday, Italy decided to halt the use

of a batch of the AstraZeneca-Oxford [coronavirus](#) vaccine because of fears over the formation of blood clots.

On Sunday, [health](#) ministry inspectors arrived in Sicily, in the south of the country, to investigate the death there of a 43-year-old soldier last Tuesday after having received the vaccine.

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