

# Belgium pauses re-opening plans as virus infections mount

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A man walks by a closed cafe, due to COVID-19 restrictions, which is now selling books and hats and offering take-away service on the sidewalk in Antwerp, Belgium, Friday, March 18, 2021. Belgian health authorities are urging residents to limit their social contacts to a bare minimum and to massively opt for remote working to avoid another wave of COVID-19 infections. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said Friday that the country faces a few "crucial weeks" as the number of coronavirus infections rise, and that the government has decided to pause its plans to gradually ease restrictions.

Obligatory mask-wearing outdoors, night-time curfews and restaurant and bar closures have been in place since the start of November. A ban on non-essential travel is also in effect. The plan had been to offer some relief to long-suffering citizens by resuming some [outdoor activities](#) from April 1.

"We are pressing the pause button," De Croo told reporters.

Earlier Friday, [health authorities](#) said the number of confirmed new daily infections had risen by a third

over the past seven days, to reach 3,226 on average. Hospitalizations due to COVID-19 also rose by 27% over the same period.

Virologist Yves Van Laethem warned that the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care beds could reach a critical level by April 10 if the pace of infections does not slow down.

De Croo said that most new cases were being found in schools and in the work place. The number of elderly people catching or dying from the virus is dropping as Belgium's vaccination program kicks in.

"We have one month to limit social contacts as much as possible so that schools can open normally again on April 19" after the Easter vacation, De Croo said. He said the travel ban will also remain in place until at least the same date.



A carpet seller sits outside his store on a nearly empty shopping street in Antwerp, Belgium, Friday, March 18, 2021. Belgian health authorities are urging residents to limit their social contacts to a bare minimum and to massively opt for remote working to avoid another wave of COVID-19 infections. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

Van Laethem said earlier that Belgium is "standing

at the foot of a third wave of infections," but that people can help turn that into a "mini-wave" by respecting the rules.

A total of 22,624 people have died from [coronavirus](#)-related causes in Belgium, a country with 11.5 million inhabitants that was among the hardest-hit globally when the pandemic broke. Around 7.5% of the population has received a first jab of coronavirus vaccine so far.

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