

Belgium prolongs coronavirus lockdown

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Belgium on Wednesday extended its stay-at-home order to curb the coronavirus until at least May 3 and banned mass gatherings—concerts, festivals and sporting events—until the end of August.

The lockdown has seen schools, bars and restaurants closed since mid-March, while the country's per capita [death](#) rate has risen to among the highest in the world.

Announcing the decision, Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes said she would hold new crisis talks next week to discuss a "progressive" loosening of measures from early May.

"It will be an evolving process, based again and always on scientific evidence with a single goal: to slow the spread of the virus," she told the nation at a televised news conference.

By Wednesday, Belgium had recorded 4,440 deaths among a population of 11.4 million—one of the highest rates in the world, although Belgium officials say they have kept closer track of deaths in retirement homes than some countries.

The European Commission, headquartered in

Brussels, has been attempting to coordinate the phasing in and phasing out of anti-virus measures across the EU.

But the announcement of a May 3 target date for Belgium came after neighbouring France prolonged its stricter lockdown to May 11, while Germany said it would begin easing some restrictions in the coming weeks.

Belgium's smaller southeastern neighbour Luxembourg was also slightly out of step, ordering its citizens to wear [face masks](#), a measure not taken nationally elsewhere.

The grand duchy's [prime minister](#), Xavier Bettel, said: "Mouth protection will be obligatory, whether it be a scarf, a bandana or a mask." Surgical [masks](#) offering a better barrier to airborne virus droplets will be made available over time.

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