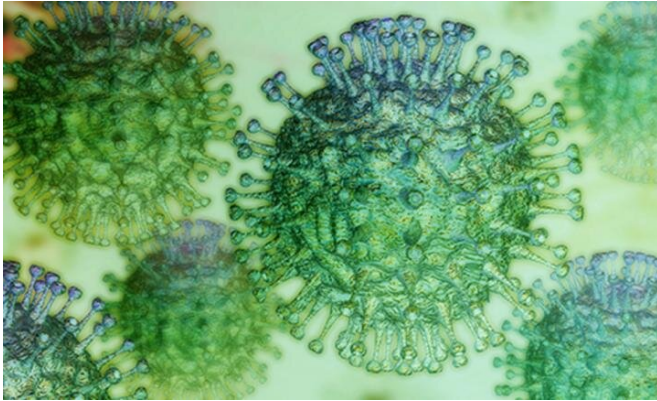


UK could start easing virus lockdown next week: PM

6 May 2020



Coronavirus. Credit: European Centers for Disease Control

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Wednesday he could begin to ease a nationwide coronavirus lockdown next week, but warned he would do nothing that would risk a new surge of cases.

He was speaking the day after Britain overtook Italy to become the worst-hit country in Europe, with more than 32,000 deaths related to COVID-19—behind only the United States in the global rankings.

Johnson said that "every death is a tragedy", calling the statistics "appalling", but said there was not yet enough data to make international comparisons.

In particular, he said he "bitterly regrets" the deaths in [care homes](#), which stand at more than 6,000, but added that there had been a "palpable improvement" in the last few days.

The wider death rate is coming down, six weeks after the government imposed stay-at-home orders to stem the rate of infection, and the lockdown

measures are up for review on Thursday.

Speaking in parliament for the first time since he himself was hospitalised with [coronavirus](#), Johnson said the government would review the data and he would set out the next steps on Sunday.

"We'll want if we possibly can to get going with some of these measures on Monday. I think it would be a good thing if people had an idea of what is coming," he said.

However, the government has previously stressed that measures would only be lifted gradually.

Johnson repeated on Wednesday: "It would be an economic disaster for this country if we were to pursue a relaxation of these measures now in such a way as to trigger a second spike."

New testing goal

It was the first time Johnson had appeared at his weekly prime minister's question time (PMQs) in the House of Commons since March 25—two days later he announced he had tested positive for coronavirus.

The 55-year-old was later admitted to hospital, spending three nights in intensive care.

He returned to work last week, but missed PMQs on April 29 after his partner Carrie Symonds gave birth to their first child together.

Quizzing the premier for the first time, new opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer, who was elected on April 4, highlighted Britain's death toll.

The health ministry says 29,427 people with coronavirus have died so far, although broader official data puts the number above 32,000—including 107 [health care workers](#) and 29 care staff.

"Can the prime minister tell us how on earth did it come to this?" Starmer asked in the largely empty chamber, where most MPs joined by videolink.

Johnson replied: "Every [death](#) is a tragedy and he's right to draw attention to the appalling statistics, not just in this country but across the world."

He unveiled a new goal to reach 200,000 coronavirus tests a day by the end of May, double the 100,000 target reached only last week.

The government is currently trialling a "track-and-trace" system using a dedicated phone app that it hopes will be able to identify localised outbreaks of coronavirus.

"A fantastic testing regime is going to be absolutely critical to our long-term economic recovery," Johnson said.

Starmer has accusation the government of being too slow to respond to the outbreak, but Johnson said his focus now was suppressing the disease.

However, he admitted his own "frustration" about the continued difficulties in getting protective equipment to healthcare staff.

Separately, one of the top scientists advising the [government](#) on the coronavirus outbreak resigned on Tuesday after breaking lockdown rules.

Professor Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College of London, said he had made an "error of judgement" after media reports that he had allowed his married lover to visit him at home.

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