

Israelis brace for new coronavirus lockdown

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Israelis reacted with anger and dismay Monday at an imminent nationwide lockdown aimed at curbing one of the world's highest novel coronavirus infection rates.

"It's unfair!" lamented Eti Avishai, a 64-year-old seamstress, hours after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a three-week [lockdown](#) will start on Friday.

"They didn't stop the big gatherings in synagogues, the weddings and the other events, and now I can't be with my children and grandchildren during the holidays?" she added.

The shutdown will be implemented hours before the start of the Jewish New Year and the High Holidays, which also include the Day of Atonement and Sukkot.

While Israelis largely accepted the strict lockdown imposed at the onset of the pandemic in March, this time many are frustrated at the way the health crisis has been handled since businesses and schools reopened in May.

"Instead of enforcing the rules in a strict way and systematically punishing those not wearing masks

or who organised gatherings of hundreds of people, they are punishing us all collectively," said Barak Yeivin, 56, director of the Jerusalem Conservatory of Music and Dance.

While weddings and other events were allowed over the summer, there have been widespread reports of Israelis surpassing the limits on numbers and breaking other health regulations.

Yeivin said the second lockdown amounted to a "real disaster" for [educational institutions](#) like his conservatory since September marks the start of the academic year.

Mental health hit

According to an AFP tally over the past two weeks, Israel is second behind Bahrain for the world's highest coronavirus infection rate.

Israel has registered 156,823 cases with 1,126 deaths out of a population of nine million.

Officials pressed ahead with the start of the school year earlier this month in all but a few places with particularly high infection rates.

Last week the government imposed a curfew in 40 high-risk towns and neighbourhoods, the vast majority Arab or ultra-Orthodox communities.

The measures failed to curb the spread of coronavirus and Netanyahu on Sunday warned [health officials](#) had "waved the red flag" over the pressure on hospitals.

Rumours are already spreading of [food shortages](#) seen in the spring, although manager Haya Amgar said her supermarket is well-stocked.

"We don't lack anything, there are eggs, toilet paper (and) [coronavirus](#) products" such as masks, she said. "I'm ready."

"There are more people this morning. It's difficult to

say if it's because of the holidays or the lockdown," she told AFP.

Those who support the new government measures argue the [economic impact](#) will be limited because of the many public holidays.

But there are widespread concerns over the damage the lockdown could have on mental health.

"I see a lot of people asking for products to sleep and against anxiety," said Yoram Poplinger, 61, working in a central Jerusalem pharmacy.

Judith Touati, a 34-year-old social worker, said the shutdown would be especially hard for the elderly.

"I understand the risk for old people sat at the table with a lot of people, but is it better to let them die alone?" she said.

Rivka Vaknin, 70, said she was "so depressed" at the thought of being alone during the holidays.

"They could have done it before. Why now during the [holiday](#) season?"

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