

# Germany enters harder lockdown as virus deaths hit new high



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BERLIN (AP) — Germany reported a record level of coronavirus deaths as it entered a harder lockdown Wednesday, closing shops and schools to try to bring down stubbornly high new daily infections.

The country recorded 179.8 virus infections per 100,000 residents over the last seven days, a new high and significantly more than the 149 per 100,000 reported a week ago by the Robert Koch Institute, the country's disease control center.

It also blew past its previous daily death toll, with Germany's 16 states reporting that 952 more people had died of the virus, the institute said. That was far greater than the previous daily record set Friday of 598 deaths, although it included two days of figures from the hard-hit eastern state of Saxony, which did not report Tuesday. It brought the country's overall pandemic death toll to 23,427.

"It's as if the virus wanted to remind us how important what we're now doing is,"

Health Minister Jens Spahn said of the surge in deaths being reported on the day new restrictions come into force.

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Faced with exponentially increasing cases in October, Germany implemented a “lockdown light” at the start of November, which closed bars and restaurants but left shops open. The measures slowed the weekly increase in new infections but didn’t bring them down, prompting officials to take more drastic measures.

In addition to closing shops and moving children to remote learning for the few days before the Christmas holidays, private gatherings are being limited to two households with a maximum of five people, among other things.

On Berlin’s upscale Kurfuerstendamm boulevard, Berlin resident Noury Oeddin looked around at the empty streets and shuttered shops in disbelief as the lockdown measures announced Sunday were put into force.

“It’s very strange, it’s not normal,” said the 46-year-old bakery manager. “I don’t know what these politicians want to do — they left it all open for too long, and now all of a sudden we had to quickly buy everything in two days. We people don’t know what they are doing anymore.”

Retiree Hans-Joachim Pauer said, however, that the measures were understandable.

“This is certainly harmful to the economy, but what alternative do we have?” the 71-year-old asked. “Certainly it is not good.”

Grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, banks, and other businesses providing services deemed essential — including Christmas tree vendors — can remain open.

In Saxony, where the virus is spreading most rapidly in Germany at the moment, hospitals are filling up. The state’s governor said more drastic restrictions might be necessary, calling it “pure poison” when too many people were still going out

and about.

The restrictions are expected last until at least Jan. 10 but enjoy wide support, with the latest polls showing more than 80% of Germans approve of the lockdown measures or think they should be stricter.

"This year, I don't think Christmas is that important, in the face of the facts we have in society right now," said Stella Kretschmer, who was picking up a prescription in the western city of Cologne.

The 27-year-old student said she was in favor of shops being closed down.

"For me, consumption is not the most important thing," she said, adding, however, that she does "feel sorry for the people who ... have to fear for their jobs."

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Germany was widely praised for slowing the spread of its outbreak in the spring, but as people grew lax with distancing and mask rules over the summer the numbers of cases started to climb again.

While daily new cases peaked in March at about 6,000, they are now more than four times that level, with 27,728 new cases reported Wednesday by the Robert Koch Institute.

German officials have pressed the European Union's regulatory agency hard to speed up its approval of a coronavirus vaccine, and the European Medicines Agency has scheduled a meeting Monday on that. With vaccinations expected to start before year's end, German officials have urged people to stay patient and respect the regulations over the holidays.

Spahn, the health minister, said Germany was ready and could begin vaccinations within two to four days of the EMA's approval.

"These are difficult days and at the same time they're days that give rise to optimism, to hope, because there's light at the end of the tunnel," he told lawmakers. "Vaccination is the way out of this pandemic and we are well prepared for this path."

Authorities in Berlin said late Wednesday that Spahn had informed health officials

from the country's 16 states about progress in getting regulatory approval for the vaccine made by BioNTech and Pfizer, and plans for shipping it.

"The states conclude from this that Dec. 27 will be the start date for vaccinations," Berlin's health office said in a statement. "In particular, the vaccination should begin in nursing homes."

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Dorothee Thiesing and Frank Jordans contributed to this story.

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