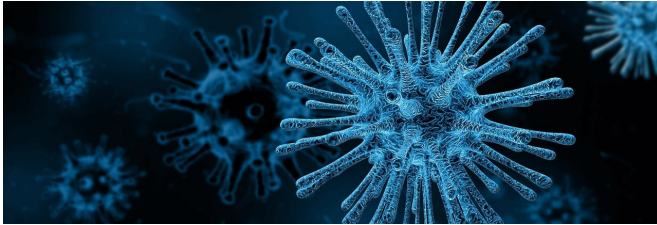


Japan to extend state of emergency over virus: reports

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Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is likely to extend a nationwide state of emergency imposed over the coronavirus, possibly by another month, local media reported on Thursday.

The measure was initially declared on April 7 across seven regions experiencing a spike in infections, but was later expanded to cover the entire country.

With the initial month-long period coming to an end next week after the country's annual Golden Week holidays, local media reported that Abe was now expected to extend the measure, either until the end of May or for another full month until June 6.

In parliament on Thursday, Abe said the country's healthcare system continues to face an "extremely tough situation."

He told lawmakers on Wednesday that "even now, we are seeing new infections," adding: "Can we say on May 6 the [state of emergency](#) is over? I think severe situations are continuing."

Local media including the Nikkei newspaper reported the government would convene a panel of experts on Friday to discuss the virus and the state of emergency, adding that the experts had already informally backed a move to extend the measures.

It was not yet clear when any extension would be announced, but Abe has said he will not wait until the last minute, to allow business and institutions including schools time to prepare accordingly.

The declaration has limited legal power compared to measures seen in some parts of Europe and elsewhere. It allows governors to call on people to stay home and urge businesses to close, but there are no punishments for those who fail to comply.

But the emergency declaration has been effective at encouraging people to stay home, and Japan should expect to impose it again to deal with future waves of infections, said Tohru Kakuta, a vice president of Tokyo Medical Association.

"The Japanese people tend to believe and follow the instructions that come from above... as well as to follow what others are doing to stick with the crowd," he told a press briefing.

"We can also expect to see the second and third waves and so on. Therefore what would be important is to detect those at early stage so that actions can be taken," he said, warning that the world was in for "a long fight" with the [infection](#).

Regional governors have already voiced support for the extension of the state of emergency, with many of them also suggesting that the school year start date should now be moved from its usual April to September, as schools in most of the country have been closed since March.

Japan has so far seen a relatively limited outbreak compared to parts of Europe and the United States, with around 14,000 infections recorded and 415 deaths.

But it has faced criticism for carrying out comparatively few tests, which some critics argue leaves the actual rate of infection in the country unclear.

Kakuta said Japan should increase testing, particularly among vulnerable people such as those with underlying medical conditions.

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