

Denmark slaps curbs on 280,000 people to fight virus mutation

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This transmission electron microscope image shows SARS-CoV-2 -- also known as 2019-nCoV, the virus that causes COVID-19 -- isolated from a patient in the US. Virus particles are shown emerging from the surface of cells cultured in the

lab. The spikes on the outer edge of the virus particles give coronaviruses their name, crown-like. Credit: NIAID-RML

Denmark announced special restrictions for more than 280,000 people in the country's northwest on Thursday after a mutated version of the new coronavirus linked to mink farms was found in humans.

Copenhagen warned that the mutation could threaten the effectiveness of any future vaccine.

"From tonight, citizens in seven areas of north Jutland are strongly encouraged to stay in their area to prevent the spread of infection," Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told a news conference.

She said people were being ordered not to travel there, while bars and restaurants would also shut.

"We are asking you in north Jutland to do something completely extraordinary," Frederiksen said, talking of a "real closure" of the region.

"The eyes of the world are on us," she added.

Public transport in the region will be shut down with buses and trains stopped from entering or leaving.

Some schoolchildren will have to follow their classes online in restrictions that are due to last a month.

Denmark, the world's largest exporter of mink fur, raised concerns on Wednesday by announcing the slaughter of all mink in the

country—numbering 15 to 17 million spread over 1,080 farms—following the discovery of the mutation which can be passed to humans.

The mutation has already been detected in 12 people—11 cases in the region being closed down, and one in another.

Scientists say virus mutations are common and often harmless.

Some experts have nevertheless called on Denmark to release more scientific data to better evaluate this one.

According to Danish authorities, this virus mutation doesn't cause a more severe illness in humans.

But it is not inhibited by antibodies to the same degree as the normal virus, which they fear could threaten the efficacy of coronavirus vaccines that are being developed around the world.

In north Jutland, health authorities believe around five percent of coronavirus patients could be carrying this mutated strain, but no recent case has been reported.

As such, Viggo Andreasen, epidemiology professor at Roskilde University, said the mutation had "quite a good chance" of disappearing, as long as it is effectively contained.

Denmark, a 5.8-million-strong country, has been relatively spared from the ravages of COVID-19 with 733 deaths reported.

But it imposed new national restrictions in October to curb a rapid spike in cases.

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