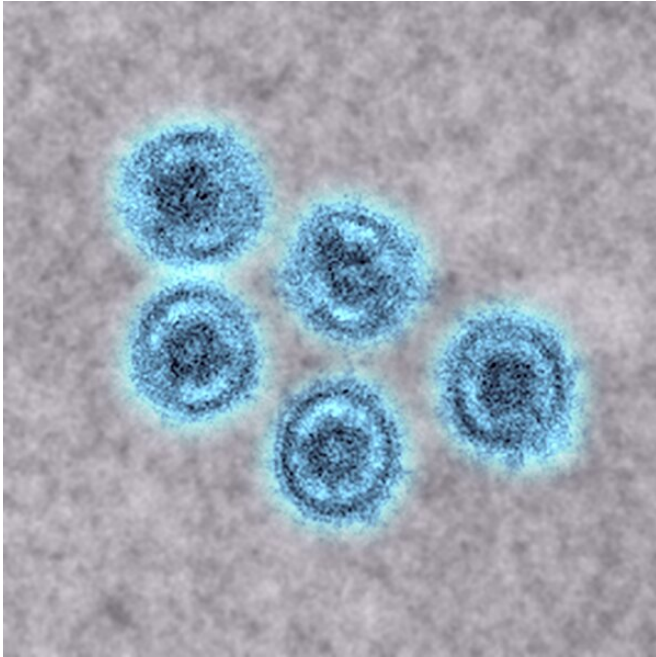


Belgians breach virus rules as warm weather draws crowds

1 April 2021, by Samuel Petrequin



This colorized transmission electron micrograph shows a slice of Reston virus particles (blue) in the lung of an infected pig. Credit: NIAID

Belgium has an extra unexpected hurdle to overcome in its fight against the coronavirus: a bout of gorgeous weather.

Temperatures in Belgium have never been so high so early in the year—reaching 24.5 degrees Celsius (76 Fahrenheit)—and the [warm weather](#) is bringing thousands of people to coastal beaches and parks amid a worrying surge of COVID-19 cases.

The [good weather](#) was expected to continue until Friday and the start of the Easter weekend. Good news for the 11.5 million Belgians craving sun after a gloomy winter, but a real worry for the government struggling to deal with a third wave of infections.

In response to the number of passengers on its trains, Belgium's national rail company, SNCB, was forced to activate a "stop-and-go" system to prevent travelers from boarding in several train stations packed to the rafters on Tuesday.

Under the COVID-19 restrictions imposed in Belgium, residents are banned from traveling abroad but can move freely across the country. Many did not resist the appeal of a grand day out to North Sea beaches, especially after the government decided last week to shut down schools for an extra week before the Easter school break in a bid to slow infections.

That move could ultimately backfire.

"It's too crowded. And you don't have to be a great scientist to predict that. The weather is good, and the Belgian (train pass) with free rides is still valid until the end of the month. It was bound to go wrong," Western Flanders Governor Carl Decaluwe told Het Nieuwsblad newspaper. "I'm holding my breath for the Easter holidays."

Both Decaluwe and the SNCB are now advising against trips to the coast, but the situation in big cities is also a source of worry. In Brussels, for instance, residents late Tuesday gathered en masse in one of the city's largest parks to enjoy al fresco drinks and outdoor games. Despite restrictions limiting outside gatherings to four people, large groups were spotted sitting on the grass.

Although mandatory mask-wearing outdoors is in force, many did not bother with the rule.

Brussels prosecutor's office issued a warning Wednesday following the announcement on social networks of two illegal festivals scheduled to take place on April 1 and 2 in two of the city's parks. The office said police will be deployed and that revelers attending the events in breach of COVID-19

restrictions could be prosecuted.

One of the parties is promoted by a [collective](#) called the Abyss. The group said it does not question the government's strategy but fights for citizens' rights to gather outdoors.

"Some people say we have fallen into a health dictatorship. We don't want to believe it," the group said. "We want to prove that it is still possible to live and therefore to celebrate even in the midst of a pandemic, as our grandparents did during the war."

A night-time curfew and other restrictions have been in place in Belgium since last year. A court in Brussels ordered the government Wednesday to either end exceptional measures it imposed in the context of the pandemic or to frame them properly as laws, Belgian media reported. The ruling came in a lawsuit brought by the Belgian League of Human Rights.

Belgium has reported over 876,000 confirmed [coronavirus](#) cases and almost 23,000 virus-related deaths. Hospitalizations due to COVID-19 have risen consistently in recent weeks, and the country's health authorities have warned that intensive care unit occupancy could reach a critical level by April 10 if the pace of infections does not slow down.

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