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Health experts say a lockdown in Quebec is long overdue

“My reaction is relief that they’re finally doing what needs to be done, but with incredible frustration that it’s so late,” one public health expert said of the impending lockdown announcement.

Jesse Feith • Montreal Gazette

Jan 06, 2021 • Last Updated 51 minutes ago • 3 minute read



Premier François Legault had been expected to make the announcement on Tuesday, but it was delayed 24 hours in order to
<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-headed-for-full-lockdown-curfews-beginning-saturday-report>

meet with representatives of the affected sectors. PHOTO BY PAUL CHIASSON /The Canadian Press files

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Public health experts welcomed reports Tuesday of a plan to soon enter a province-wide lockdown, but also questioned why the provincial government ignored calls to do so much earlier.

According to [La Presse](#), the lockdown would begin Saturday and last three to four weeks, extending to schools, offices, construction work and all other businesses deemed non-essential. It could also include a province-wide curfew.



Quebec Premier François Legault is expected to announce the lockdown's details at a news conference Wednesday evening.

Health experts who spoke with the Montreal Gazette agreed the lockdown is a needed step but said the time to do it was last month, when COVID-19 cases began surging across the province.

“My reaction is relief that they're finally doing what needs to be done, but with incredible frustration that it's so late,” said Dr. Donald Sheppard, chair of the department of microbiology and immunology in McGill's faculty of medicine.

“The reality is we know the case numbers and hospitalizations are going to keep going up for a minimum of two to four weeks once this starts,” Sheppard added.

The length and extent of the lockdown will only be known Wednesday. Media reports have suggested it would include keeping elementary schools closed for one extra week, until Jan. 18, and high schools closed until one week after that. Daycares are expected to remain open.

Whatever it decides to do, Sheppard urged the government to be straightforward in its announcement on Wednesday and to be clear, from the outset, how long the lockdown will be in effect and why it's important.

He also warned any lockdown less than a month long would be inefficient, given what's known about transmission and how the virus can spread within family bubbles.

“A real lockdown, to have a meaningful effect, takes a minimum of four weeks,” Sheppard said. “We saw it ourselves in the spring, and it's been seen around the world. It's based on science.”

News of the lockdown comes as a growing number of health experts inside and outside of government have described the crisis in Quebec as now being out of control, with the health-care network increasingly overwhelmed.

Quebec reported 2,508 new COVID-19 cases Tuesday, including 790 in Montreal, with 62 more deaths.

There are now 1,317 people hospitalized with the disease across the province, including 194 in intensive care. A total of 8,441 people have died.

Among those calling for stricter measures has been Roxane Borgès Da Silva, an associate professor in the Université de Montréal's school of public health.

On Tuesday, Borgès Da Silva said it's now clear the partial measures implemented during the holidays were not effective. She wished authorities would have listened to those signalling stricter measures were needed a month ago.

“The government preferred to bet that Quebecers would be responsible and follow recommendations,” she said. “It didn't want to enforce it and now we find ourselves in a dangerous spot, with our hospitals

hurting and cases increasing.”

Whether Quebec implements a province-wide curfew — a measure not yet used in the province during the pandemic — is expected to be decided on Wednesday. Curfews have been used in other countries around the world, as well as in some American states.

If nothing else, Borgès Da Silva said curfews can be useful to drive the point home. Seeing how Quebecers do not appear to be respecting the measures right now, she agreed it may be necessary.

Despite the ban on gatherings being in effect, [a survey released Tuesday](#) showed nearly half of Quebecers visited friends or family over the holidays.

“Curfews encourage individual awareness and tell people to be responsible and stay home,” Borgès Da Silva said. “It can make them reflect, before leaving their home, whether it’s really for an essential reason or if it can wait.”

Sheppard, for his part, said curfews can have the psychological benefit of convincing people the province is taking the pandemic seriously.

But that alone would not be enough, he added.

“The most bang for your buck is closing down the schools, closing down the workplaces,” he said. “That’s where we know a large amount of the transmission is happening.”

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