The Belgian response to COVID-19 – Protect yourself and protect the others!

General approach

A new coronavirus, called Covid-19, appeared in China at the end of last year. Since then, this virus has spread all over the world, including Belgium. Health authorities in Belgium are doing everything possible to protect everyone’s health.

Already in January, Belgium convened its crisis coordination team, the Risk Management Group, to manage the Belgian response to the COVID-19 challenge. Also a special scientific committee has been convened. They advise the authorities on the latest scientific developments as to assure the swift elaboration of necessary measures. On March 13th, the government also decided to activate the National Security Council.

By mid-March, Belgium entered into a phase community transmission at a low level of COVID-19. Hence, Belgium initiated the second ‘reinforced’ phase of its COVID-19 response plan. This means that a set of additional measures have been taken by the Belgian federal and regional authorities. These measures have been taken to prevent a further spread of COVID-19 within our society.

General advice on personal hygiene

Preventing community transmission is the essence. Containment and social distancing are now key measures. We provide following seven key recommendations to the public to prevent the spread of infections:

1. Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and water.
2. Do you have to cough? Put it in a tissue or the inside of your elbow.
3. Use paper tissues when sneezing or blowing and throw them away in a lockable bin.
4. Avoid shaking hands. Greet each other by waiving or with the elbow.
5. Stay home if you are sick. Don’t go to work!
6. Avoid close contact with sick people yourself.
7. Try to avoid touching your face with your hands as little as possible.

Social distancing

In order to further prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Belgium, a set of new measures linked to social distancing were announced on March 12 by the Belgian authorities. These measures will take effect at midnight the night of Friday March 13 and will last at least until April 3:
Schools:

- All classes are suspended in schools. Strictly speaking, schools do not close, daycare centers must be organized.
- The shelter is at least for the children of parents who work in the medical and health sector and in public security. In this way, the government wants to ensure that hospitals and health care facilities, for example, can continue to operate.
- There are certainly daycare services for children who would otherwise only be able to be looked after by the elderly. The elderly are a risk group, the government wants them to be exposed as little as possible to possible contamination.
- The nurseries remain open.
- Universities and colleges are recommended to develop distance learning modules. These schools are therefore not closed, but are encouraged to offer alternatives to traditional courses in auditoriums or confined spaces.

Work place:

- Everyone will continue to work as much as possible, but telework should be promoted and reinforced if necessary, and congestion in general(such as educational activities) has to be avoided.

Gatherings, reception, shops and cultural and sporting activities:

- All recreational, sports, cultural and folklore activities are canceled, whatever their size and whether public or private.
  Exception: a funeral can be organized in an intimate circle.
- Discos, cafes and restaurants, will remain closed. Only take-out meals are allowed. Home delivery and drive-in are also allowed;
- The hotels remain open, with the exception of all restaurants in hotels.
- Food stores, pet food stores and pharmacies - in short: stores that provide essential services - remain open as usual, even on weekends. It is recommended to strengthen hygiene measures based at the advice already given.
- Other businesses and stores are closed during the weekend, but remain open during the week.

Public transport:
• Public transport is operating normally. It is requested to limit the use to the necessary movements and moments, preferably outside rush hour. Employers are requested to allow flexible working hours so that public transport is not overloaded at rush hour.

Risk groups:

the specific risk groups are the elderly (65 and over).

What happens when a positive case of COVID-19 is found in Belgium?

A new procedure is also applied since March 10. Anyone with acute respiratory symptoms that appear or worsen (1) stays at home, (2) calls his attending physician who will advise for next steps, and (3) the patient stays home until symptoms disappear.

If the patient has severe symptoms and/or risk factors (e.g., underlying diseases, etc.), the patient is referred to the hospital. At the hospital, after a clinical examination, the patient can then be tested for COVID-19, and until the results are available he is isolated.

Rational use of mouth masks

Although there still is protective equipment available, these should be used rationally. As a general advice, please note that wearing mouth masks to protect you against the COVID-19 is not seen as an effective measure. The use of such a mask is only useful for infected patients and for healthcare personnel.

Travel information

Regarding travel advice, especially for trips to affected regions, up-to-date recommendations by the Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs is available here:

https://diplomatie.belgium.be/fr/Services/voyager_a_letranger

More information:

- For the general public and FAQs: www.info-coronavirus.be
- For questions on the coronavirus: federal call center on 0800/14689
- We refer for regular updates in measures taken to the website of Sciensano: https://www.sciensano.be/en