



# COVID-19 and Long-Term Care in Slovenia: impact, measures and lessons learnt

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## 1. Impact of the COVID-19 outbreak so far and population level measures

On the 12th March 2020 Slovenia declared coronavirus to be an epidemic, on the basis of Article 7 of the Communicable Diseases Act, due to the increasing number of cases of infection. The expert opinion of the National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ) formed the basis for declaring the epidemic. There were 96 cases of coronavirus infection in Slovenia at the time.

### *1.1. Population testing and numbers of cases:*

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Slovenia continues to grow, although not at an exponential rate. As of 15 April, Slovenia reported 1,248 confirmed COVID cases and 61 fatalities, with 96 hospitalized, of whom 34 are in intensive care.

A total of 189 infections were found among health care workers and colleagues and 219 among nursing home residents.

Slovenia was one of the first European countries which, soon after the outbreak of infection in China, launched testing to confirm the virus. Testing for COVID-19 began on the 27 January 2020, and a total of 30,669 tests had been performed by 7 April 2020.<sup>1</sup> Some people were tested several times, and three people tested positive abroad.

### *1.2. Population-level measures to tackle COVID-19:*

A Slovenian excellence center has started developing a vaccine for the new Coronavirus in cooperation with Slovenian and international companies, research institutes and universities. The main goal of the consortium is to develop a platform which would enable fast creation of vaccines in case of similar epidemics.

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<sup>1</sup> Slovenia has population of 2.094.060 milion, <https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en>.

Patients with COVID-19 are currently treated at the Department of Infectious Diseases in Ljubljana, University Medical Centre Maribor and University clinic Golnik and at other regional hospitals. The isolation centre of the Slovenian Armed Forces has also been established.

Instructions for epidemiological monitoring of ill people and the monitoring of people who were in contact with persons that tested positive were drafted and published. All public health institutions received instructions for treating persons suspected to have contracted novel coronavirus in primary health care and hospitals. The operations in all health institutions at all levels were adjusted to the spread of coronavirus. Before visiting community health centres at primary level, it is necessary to call in advance. The majority of non-urgent and preventive examinations were cancelled and, in particular, all health institutions banned visits. Health professionals are prohibited from travelling abroad and their right to leave and strike is restricted.

On the 2nd April 2020, the National Assembly of Slovenia adopted new COVID-19 intervention measures by passing the “Anti-Corona” act, which supplements and partially revokes intervention measures already in force. Strict measures to control the epidemic were announced on the 29th of March to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Chemicals Office of the Republic of Slovenia advises to clean surfaces with ordinary detergent and disinfect them with disinfection products that have antiviral effects indicated in the instructions or on the label.

People are restricted to their own municipality except for work, providing *assistance to those needing care*, and accessing emergency services, pharmacies and judicial authorities. People can continue to go to their nearest food shop, as well as parks within their municipality. For stores, the first two opening hours and the final closing hour are for groups who are particularly vulnerable to infections – *older people*, women who are pregnant and *people with disabilities*; others are not be able to shop during these designated times. For indoor public places, including shops, facemasks and gloves are required. Homemade masks such as scarves over the mouth/nose are permitted. Shops remain closed with the exception of food, pharmacies, petrol stations, banks, and post offices. Grocery stores are open 08.00-20.00 but closed on Sunday and holidays, while fuel stations, and pharmacies are permitted to remain open on those days.

The government published guidance about preventing infections, available at: <https://www.gov.si/en/topics/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/coronavirus-preventing-infections/>.

As of Saturday, 11 April 2020, a seven-day quarantine has been imposed upon entry into Slovenia<sup>2</sup>. On the last day of quarantine it is mandatory to undergo testing for COVID-19

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<sup>2</sup> Exceptions: cross-border workers commuting daily or weekly across the border with Austria, persons attending the funeral of a close relative in a neighbouring country, persons carrying out the transport of goods or transport of goods in transit, transit passengers, persons with diplomatic passports, persons providing

infection. If a person refuses to allow swabbing for testing or a swab cannot be taken, the quarantine is extended for seven days. The quarantine is also extended if the results are not available on the day of swabbing, but only until the day the test results are received and not for more than 14 days from the day the quarantine was imposed. Swabs are taken at one of the entry points (COVID-19 screening clinics). If the test is negative, the quarantine is concluded. If the test is positive, the person concerned is treated in accordance with the professional guidelines for treating persons infected with SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19).

The COVID-19 epidemic in Slovenia is believed to be under control, allowing public life to gradually re-start, but the danger is not over yet and significant caution will be needed going forward, according to the government's chief medical adviser for the coronavirus epidemic. After the introduction of strict measures, such as the closure of schools and kindergartens and restrictions on the movement of people, the spread has slowed. "The curve has now turned downwards and we can therefore start talking about a gradual relaxation of measures and steady normalisation of life," said Bojana Beović the Head of the Expert Group that provides support to the Crisis Staff of the Republic of Slovenia for the containment and control of the COVID-19 epidemic. Beović presented estimates by several groups of researchers showing that the reproduction rate, which shows how many people one patient infects on average, had dropped to below one, which epidemics experts see as a point at which an epidemic starts to subside. While some estimates she showed put it at over one, others have placed it significantly lower, to between 0.7 and 0.8. But Beović was also quick to point out that this was not an epidemic that will end like SARS did. She said Slovenia was now in a transitional phase from an epidemic wave to a phase in which the epidemic will simmer and new outbreaks will be possible. This means epidemiologists working in the field will have their work cut out trying to contain such outbreaks. It also means people will have to continue abiding by measures such as wearing face masks in closed public spaces, using hand sanitizer and prevent physical contact. "If we adhere to these measures, we'll be able to gradually open the country," the doctor said.

Slovenia entered lockdown on 20 March and measures were stepped up on 30 March, when most movement outside the home municipality was banned. Most retail outlets were closed on 16 March.

The first significant relaxation of measures started on the 18th April, when people were allowed to go to their properties in a different municipality. On the 20th April some service activities were also allowed to open, with a new wave of relaxation scheduled for 4 May, when small shops up to 400 square metres will be allowed to open, as well as hairdressers, beauty parlours and several other service establishments.

<https://english.sta.si/2753549/coronavirus-epidemic-in-slovenia-seen-as-under-control>, 17.4.2020.

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emergency services, members of the protection and rescue services, healthcare services, police and firefighting service and persons carrying out humanitarian transport, the owners or tenants of land on both sides of the national border who are citizens of the Republic of Slovenia, the Republic of Austria, the Italian Republic or the Republic of Hungary., source: <https://www.gov.si/teme/koronavirus/>, 17.4.2020.

### *1.3. Number of positive cases and deaths among residents in care homes*

On the 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020 there had been 152 COVID-19 infections among health care sector staff, 117 among care home staff and 276 among care home residents. <https://covid-19.sledilnik.org/#/stats>,

On the 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020, at a press conference, the Minister for Labour Janez Cigler Kralj said that 90 out of 102 nursing homes in Slovenia had so far detected no infection with COVID-19 either in caregivers or employees. According to him, the situation in 90% of the homes for older people is under control: "We pay special attention to the homes where the virus has appeared".

According to him, there should be no deviation from the expert instructions. Regarding the lack of protective equipment in nursing homes, the minister said that the government has been making every effort to get this equipment in health facilities and care homes. "We have a little more equipment now and we can be calm. At the ministry, we have these matters under control, and homes need to report to us daily about the need," explained minister Cigler Kralj. Asked about the need for additional staff in nursing homes, he said that assistance was provided by local hospitals and regional coordinators. Additional staffing assistance is provided for care homes: Ljutomer (39 persons), Metlika (14 persons) and Šmarje pri Jelsah (35 persons).

#### **Sources:**

In Šmarje pri Jelsah, 4 people in the home have recovered and 27 of them will be tested again and we expect that in their case the recovery will be confirmed.  
<https://twitter.com/vladaRS/status/1250721947224281088>, 16.4.2020.

We regularly monitor the home for elderly's staffing needs, source  
<https://twitter.com/vladaRS/status/1250724311280889857>, 16.4.2020.

## **2. Policy and practice measures for the long-term care sector**

Preparedness, especially for the aged care sector, for COVID-19 has been a very high priority for the health minister and government. We can obtain all information about COVID-19 at the toll-free number 080 1404 (from abroad: +386 1 478 7550) every day between 08:00 and 20:00. Callers' questions are answered by senior students of the Faculty of Medicine under the supervision of suitable expert services/experts.

In parallel with the adaptation of the health care system to new epidemiological conditions, we are intensively searching for the best solutions for the organization of health care also in nursing homes and health care institutions. One solution is to appoint primary and secondary level regional coordinators to participate in the health care of older people. The head of the Medical Chamber, Zdenka Čebašek-Travnik, has urged the government to use all medical staff, including private doctors and dentists, to restart the country's healthcare when it begins to gradually exit the coronavirus crisis.

A one-off solidarity allowance has been announced, this will pay a one-off payment to 328,780 pensioners with low pensions, which will be paid in three different amounts (300 EUR, 230 EUR and 130 EUR), depending on the amount of their pension. We are extending the deadline for submitting applications for the recognition of rights under the Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act and for exercising rights from public funds. The validity of all entitlements from public funds (financial social assistance, care allowance, child benefit and others expiring on or after 31 March) is renewed monthly for one month.

<https://www.gov.si/novice/2020-03-24-predstavitev-protikورونا-paketa-za-pomoc-prebivalstvu-in-gospodarstvu/>,

In the coming days, a psycho-social assistance network will be launched for care home staff who are burnt out at these times

<https://twitter.com/vladaRS/status/1250722575308722177>, 16.4.2020.

### *2.1. Residential and nursing homes*

The National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ) drafted detailed instructions for health professionals and epidemiologists. Slovenia is so far well prepared of an outbreak of the novel coronavirus COVID-19, but our hospitals and nursing homes are not expected to be able to handle a great number of patients (in case that a scenario like the ones in Italy, Spain etc. happened). The health and social care personnel have been given concrete information about how to handle COVID-19. All institutions have their own pandemic plans in place.

Another top priority of our government was protecting groups at higher risk, such as *older people, people with chronic diseases and those with a weakened immune system*. Mobile medical teams are conducting coronavirus testing at nursing homes to make it easier for the residents as well as to reduce the workload of certain emergency services.

The government is working to ensure that, despite the infection, older people can continue to stay in care homes and receive adequate health care in parallel. After consultation with the doctor, patients can also be transferred to the hospital if necessary. A complete ban on visits to care homes was introduced due to the increasing number of people infected with coronavirus in Slovenia and to protect the health of residents. Taking suitable measures is the primary concern, task and commitment of all providers of services for older people, with the aim to protect the health of their service users. Where possible, in case of infections in a care home, healthy residents will be relocated to other facilities. In recent days a few families (less than ten) have taken relatives out of care homes.

Where staff in nursing homes become exhausted or overwhelmed, medical teams will be deployed to these homes. There are other measures under consideration, because many homes have been built in a way that does not allow for effective isolation and infection control.

Apart from the Metlika nursing home (50 residents, 5 died), another coronavirus hotspot in Slovenia is nursing home at Šmarje pri Jelšah near Celje (60 residents, 13 employees) in

eastern Slovenia, the second biggest outbreak in the country, only preceded by the capital<sup>3</sup>. From this week there have also been outbreaks in nursing homes at Ljutomer (44 residents, 4 employees), Horjul (26 residents).

The biggest problem in nursing homes is the lack of skilled personnel, space constraints and lack of a stockpile of PPE, this will limit their ability to comply with all the instructions and precautionary measures. According to the Department of Labor, there have been 225 confirmed infections of residents in care homes and 72 care home staff (government press conference, 9.4.2020, <https://twitter.com/GovorecCOVID19/status/1248174617132519424>)

## 2.2. *Community-based care*

The government published Recommendations for cleaning and waste management in domestic care of people with COVID-19 (or suspected COVID-19). Since it is our duty to protect the older population, the NIJZ published recommendation called *Epidemic of new viral disease COVID-19 and elderly*. Also some other instructions were published.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Key challenges:

Since we do not have special legislation about long-term care no extra tips for caregivers in informal care is given. We just have some general tips how to wash hands, avoiding people etc ([https://www.zd-lj.si/zdli/images/priporocila\\_za\\_starejse\\_letak.pdf](https://www.zd-lj.si/zdli/images/priporocila_za_starejse_letak.pdf), 17.4.2020.), but there is no extra help from formal caregivers or special guidance for informal carers so far.

### **Sources:**

- GOV.SI PORTAL <https://www.gov.si/>
- National Institute of Public Health <https://www.nijz.si/en>
- Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office <https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/>

### **Suggested citation:**

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<sup>3</sup> The outbreak erupted after a primary school teacher tested positive for the virus in mid March. Both she and the doctor from Metlika reportedly got infected while on holidays in northern Italy.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nijz.si/sl/koronavirus-sars-cov-2-navodila-za-strokovno-javnost>.