

TOP HEALTH OFFICIAL: THIS IS JUST THE START OF THE VIRUS

Netanyahu tells Israelis: Now it's an order — you must stay at home

Government to approve emergency ordinances requiring people not to leave home unless necessary; PM says rules initially in effect for 7 days

By **TOI STAFF**

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gives a televised statement on the coronavirus at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem on March 16, 2020. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday announced authorities would begin taking legal action against Israelis who leave their homes in violation of strict Health Ministry directives aimed at containing the coronavirus.

“Yesterday I asked you to listen to the Health Ministry directives and stay at home,” Netanyahu said in a televised statement from his office. While many Israelis had heeded the call, others had not, and so the directives would now become mandatory.

“The government will approve emergency ordinances tonight to limit movement,” he said.

“This isn't a request, this isn't a recommendation, but a binding requirement that will be enforced,” he added.

Netanyahu said the mandatory regulations would come into effect immediately after their overnight Thursday-Friday approval and would remain in force for an initial period of seven days.

“The purpose of these instructions — to ensure as few people will be infected and will infect [others],” Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu acknowledged the move was “unlike any since the founding of the State of Israel,” but said the country has never before faced anything like the coronavirus.

There was no immediate information on what the punishments would be for violators of the Health Ministry directives, [which were originally announced Tuesday](#).



A man wearing a face mask cycles down Jaffa Street Jerusalem on March 19, 2020. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

The regulations permit people to leave their homes only for the following activities:

1. Going to work and coming back;
2. Stocking up on food, medicine, necessary products and to receive essential services;
3. Receiving medical treatment;
4. Donating blood;
5. Participating in demonstrations;
6. Unorganized sports activity in groups no larger than five people;
7. Brief walks for a short time and to a place close to the person's residence, without coming close to people they don't live with;
8. Going to a wedding, funeral or for prayer;
9. Helping a person who due to their age, medical conditions or a disability, requires assistance;
10. Going out for a vital need that hasn't been specified in articles 1-9.

During all those activities, people should maintain a distance of two meters, or six feet, from anyone, as much as possible. People staying in the same household do not need to keep that distance from one another.

In addition, no more than two people will be allowed to be in a car at any time, unless they live in the same household. The restriction will not be relevant for driving a person to and from a vital workplace.

Deliveries are required to be placed outside the building, next to the entrance.

The document does not specify what the punishment for violators will be.

The regulations bar people from opening malls and other leisure venues or national parks, except places selling food, pharmacies or hygiene product stores. The punishment for those who keep their business open is six months in jail or a fine.



Medical technicians perform a diagnostic test for coronavirus in a lab at a Leumit Health Care Services branch in Or Yehuda on March 19, 2020. (Flash90)

During the TV statement, Netanyahu also addressed complaints about a lack of protective gear for Israeli medical teams, saying it was not just Israel but many other countries around the world facing a shortage of such equipment.

He said it was “impossible” to store medical gear for years on end to prepare for a virus or other such emergency, as it would expire, and declared Israel was working to fill the gaps.

Netanyahu touted the steps the government has taken to contain the virus, saying they had “slowed down the pace of the spread” in Israel. He warned, however, that the absence of Israeli deaths from COVID-19 to date would not last, saying there could be “many victims”

He also said he was seeking to eventually increase testing for the coronavirus to 5,000 a day, up from some 2,000 currently, and again called on his centrist rival Benny Gantz to join a government he leads.

“We must form a unity government. We must come together in an emergency government,” he said.

Speaking after Netanyahu, Health Minister Yaakov Litzman said the new enforcement regime was meant “to make it easier for the public to protect itself.”

“I know we’re in an emergency. I know we won’t hesitate to do anything that will save the Israeli people,” he said.

Moshe Bar Siman-Tov, the director-general of the Health Ministry, said Israelis should leave their house only for work and to buy essential goods such as food and medicine.



Health Minister Yaakov Litzman at a press conference about the coronavirus at the Health Ministry in Jerusalem, on March 4, 2020 (Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90)

Explaining the government’s approach to the outbreak, Bar Siman-Tov said Israel was trying to achieve three things — halt the spread of the virus as much as possible, limit the number of people infected, and ensure that large numbers of Israelis do not all contract the virus at once.

“Every day that we delay the outbreak, we buy time,” he said, as it gives Israel the opportunity to obtain all the medical equipment it needs.

Bar-Siman Tov also warned that “we’re at the beginning” and it was unclear how long the pandemic would last.

Also Thursday, the transportation ministry announced it would further reduce services.

Beginning Monday, intracity bus lines across Israel will only run twice an hour, while bus companies will decide whether intercity lines will operate twice or three times an hour.

Intercity lines that already run two times or less an hour will not be affected.

Effective Wednesday night, public transportation across Israel stops at 8 p.m. each evening, before resuming the next morning. It will also no longer operate on weekends, stopping at 8 p.m. Thursday and beginning again Sunday morning.

As of Thursday, there have been 677 confirmed coronavirus cases in Israel. No one has died from COVID-19, but six people are in critical condition.



Health Ministry Director-General Moshe Bar Siman-Tov at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem on March 8, 2020. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

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