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## EUROPE

# Italy's Hospitals Face Rising Pressure From Coronavirus

The country is on course to have more Covid-19 patients in intensive care by the last week of November than during the spring peak



The intensive-care unit of the Maggiore di Lodi hospital, in Lodi, Italy, on Friday.

PHOTO: FLAVIO LO SCALZO/REUTERS

By [Eric Sylvers](#)

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MILAN—The fast-rising number of coronavirus patients in Italy's intensive-care wards is on pace to soon surpass this spring's deadly first peak of the pandemic, raising anxiety in a country that is locking down more regions.

Although social-distancing measures have reduced the speed of the increase in hospitalizations in the past few days, Italy is still on course to have more Covid-19 patients in intensive care by the last week of November than the 4,068 reached in April, when the first wave peaked.

As of Sunday, Italy had 3,422 coronavirus cases in intensive care. The total number of patients hospitalized, at 35,469, is already higher than this spring's peak.

Early this year, Italy was the first Western country to be hit hard by the coronavirus, and the first to impose a nationwide lockdown. The country began reopening in May and by the summer life had almost returned to normal as millions of people headed to the beaches and mountains.

Health experts had warned that the consequences of the freewheeling summer, followed in September by the return to work and school, could translate into a resurgence of infections and hospitalizations. But Italy's recent surge has exceeded even the most pessimistic forecasts.

On Oct. 1, there were fewer than 3,400 people in Italian hospitals being treated for Covid-19, of which 291 were in intensive care. That day, 24 people died due to the virus. Since then, the number of people in the hospital and those in intensive care has risen more than 10-fold. More than 500 people are now dying a day from the virus.

The rapid rise has put widespread strain on Italy's health-care system, affecting hospitals in many parts of the country, in contrast to the regionally concentrated first wave, which mainly hit Italy's north.



The pandemic has made more headway in Italy's poorer south during the second wave. Paramedics carry a patient into a Naples hospital on Friday.

PHOTO: SALVATORE LAPORTA/IPA/ZUMA PRESS

Ambulances in Lombardy, the region where Milan is the capital, and other parts of the country have been forced to wait in line for hours to disembark passengers at hospital emergency rooms.

Ambulances that pick up suspected coronavirus patients in Milan have begun driving directly to hospitals up to an hour away where there is more capacity.

The peak of hospitalizations could still be several weeks away, according to health-care professionals.

**"The hospital system is teetering on the edge of collapse," said Dario Manfellotto, the head of internal medicine at Rome's Fatebenefratelli hospital and the chairman of Fadoi, Italy's national association of internists.**

**Two-thirds of hospital beds in Italy slated for infectious diseases, general medicine and respiratory medicine are currently occupied by Covid-19 patients, according to Fadoi. Other wards are continually being converted to handle coronavirus patients.**

**Dr. Manfellotto's hospital had been designated by authorities as a Covid-19-free facility, but recently opened a ward for Covid-19 patients as the number of hospitalizations swelled in and around Rome.**

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## THE CORONAVIRUS RESURGENCE IN EUROPE

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[Despite Coronavirus Surge, European Schools Stay Open](#) (Nov. 14)

[In Italy's Second Coronavirus Wave, Milan Staggers as Hospitals Fill Up](#) (Nov. 9)

[How Europe's Fight Against Covid-19 Went Awry Over the Summer](#) (Oct. 24)

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The pandemic has made more headway in Italy's poorer south during the second wave, causing some of the region's hospitals to buckle. In Naples, the largest city in the south, cars on some days line up for hours to drop off coronavirus patients at the emergency room, while health-care workers administer oxygen and intravenous drips directly to people in their cars.

A video posted on social media showed a man dead on a bathroom floor inside a hospital in Naples with nobody attending to him. The man had been waiting with dozens of other suspected infected people in an overflowing emergency room where other people lay on gurneys.

While hospitalizations and confirmed infections are surging, the number of deaths is well behind the pace in the spring, thanks to people getting treated earlier, better therapies and the lower average age of those getting infected.

More than 45,000 deaths in Italy have been officially attributed to the coronavirus, with almost 9,000 of those coming in the past month. About 28,000 deaths in March and April were officially attributed to the virus, but that number greatly underestimates the virus's true death toll, because at the time many people died outside of hospitals and were never tested.

Italy has so far resisted a second nationwide lockdown. Several particularly hard-hit regions, including Lombardy, have lockdowns that severely limit personal movement and force the closure of restaurants and many stores. But much of the country has so far avoided the strictest measures.

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PREVIEW



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Mismanagement has in some cases exacerbated the situation. The government before the summer called on Italy's 20 regions to double their ICU capacity to prepare for a possible second wave. In Calabria, a region beset by organized crime and corruption, the number of ICU beds has increased by just six to 152.

A temporary hospital set up in April at Milan's trade-fair center has reopened and has about 70 patients in intensive care, taking some of the strain off local hospitals. Similar temporary hospitals have been set up in other cities, including Bergamo.

But the number of ICU beds isn't the most pressing problem, according to some doctors on the front line, as the country faces a shortage of health-care workers, especially nurses.

There needs to be one nurse for every two patients, according to Pietro Brambillasca, an ICU doctor at the Papa Giovanni XXIII hospital in Bergamo.

"Even if we build new hospitals in 10 days with 100,000 beds, we'll never have the resources to run them," said Dr. Brambillasca. "It isn't a question of building the walls, it isn't a question of machines. It's a question of personnel and it takes months to learn a new profession, otherwise the job is done incorrectly. So it's better to invest resources and people in trying to stop the virus from spreading."

Dr. Brambillasca says more diagnostics must be done outside of hospitals to free up space for seriously ill patients and to lessen the chance that Covid patients infect other people in the hospital. Strain on the hospitals should also be mitigated, he said, by setting up more so-called Covid hotels where people who still have the virus but no longer need round-the-clock hospital care could be moved.

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