Experts say relaxing social distancing controls could be ‘castastrophic’

President Trump wants the country “opened up and just raring to go by Easter.” But health experts say it’s too soon to announce the end of the social distancing measures that have been put in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

“From a public health perspective it is too early to be predict when we can start relaxing measures to control the COVID-19 epidemic, particularly at a time when the number of cases continues to grow exponentially and the number of deaths is projected to double every three days,” said Dr. Daniel Kuritzkes, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Brigham and Women’s.
“We need to know the curve has flattened before we begin contemplating relaxing appropriate public health measures,” he said.

Gregg Gonsalves, an assistant professor in the Yale School of Public Health, warned on Twitter that the virus “is sweeping across the nation—it’s going to leave a trail of death and destruction in its wake” and said a premature loosening of social distancing protocols could be catastrophic.

“It’s a terrible, terrible idea,” Gonsalves said in a telephone interview. “Everybody in the public health community says it.”

Economists, too, don’t believe that lifting the restrictions prematurely is the solution, he said.

“It’s way too soon. It’s against all mainstream epidemiological and economic advice,” he said.

Health experts have made it clear that unless Americans continue to dramatically limit social interaction — staying home from work and isolating themselves — the number of infections will overwhelm the health care system, as it has in parts of Italy, leading to many more deaths. While the worst outbreaks are concentrated in certain parts of the country, such as New York, experts warn that the highly infectious disease is certain to spread.

Trump’s enthusiasm for getting the economy rolling again sets up a potential conflict with medical professionals, including many within his government, who have called for more social restrictions to slow the spread of the virus, not fewer.

Trump has been sending signals since at least Sunday night that he wanted to get the economy, which will be crucial to his reelection efforts, restarted. The controversial Republican tweeted at 11:50 p.m. Sunday, “WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF. AT THE END OF THE 15 DAY PERIOD, WE WILL MAKE A DECISION AS TO WHICH WAY WE WANT TO GO!”

Since then, a chorus of voices has criticized the idea of loosening restrictions.

Former US Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said Monday night on Twitter, “There’s a strong and understandable desire to return to better times and a functioning economy. But it should not be lost on anyone that there’s no such thing as a functioning economy and society so long as covid-19 continues to spread uncontrolled in our biggest cities.”

“Anyone advising the end of social distancing now, needs to fully understand what the country will look like if we do that. COVID would spread widely, rapidly, terribly, could kill potentially millions in the yr ahead with huge social and economic impact across the
country,” Tom Inglesby, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security said Monday evening on Twitter.

“It is way too early to even consider rolling back any guidelines,” said Howard Koh, a professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and former top Obama administration public health official.

“With cases and deaths rising by the day, the country must double down, not lighten up, on social distancing and related measures,” said Koh, who is also a former Massachusetts public health commissioner.

Marc Lipsitch, an epidemiology professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and director of Harvard’s Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, told The Washington Post on Monday that “every well-informed infectious epidemiologist I know of” believes the United States should be tightening the restrictions.

“We haven’t yet even seen signs that the growth is slowing, much less reversing. Now is the time to tighten restrictions on contacts that could transmit the virus, not loosen them,” Lipsitch said. “If we let up now we can be virtually certain that health care will be overwhelmed in many if not all parts of the country. This is the view of every well-informed infectious epidemiologist I know of.”

Confirmed coronavirus cases in Massachusetts jumped by 382, the state reported on Tuesday, bringing the total number in the state to 1,159 — up from 777 on Monday.

Two more coronavirus-related deaths — a woman in her 80s from Middlesex County and a woman in her 60s from Berkshire County — were also reported by the state, raising the total count to 11.

The United States has a total of more than 52,000 cases, with more than 670 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

*Material from The Associated Press was used in this report.*