The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m3686<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3686>

Published: 21 September 2020

Sixty seconds on . . . circuit break

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Is this a physics lesson?

No, it's just the government's latest covid-19 buzz phrase. "Circuit break" refers to a proposal, apparently under consideration by ministers, to tighten restrictions for a short period of time to try to halt the current surge of covid-19 in England.

How would it work?

The BBC reports¹ that the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies has suggested rewiring the current set up so that parts of the hospitality industry could be closed or asked to close early for a couple of weeks, while schools and workplaces would remain open.

Are we heading for another national lockdown?

The government is desperate to avoid this, but with covid-19 cases now doubling every seven to eight days, rising to 3300 new cases reported on 17 September, it says "targeted interventions" are needed to keep infection rates down as much as possible, while protecting education and the economy.

But what about the rule of six?

That's still in place, and the government is closely monitoring its impact to see if it has helped slow the spread of covid-19. Ministers have stressed that people caught meeting in groups of more than six will face police action—particularly if they live next door to the home secretary Priti Patel, who has said she would report them.²

Does Matt Hancock want us to all to snoop on our neighbours?

Yes. The health secretary has also said he would be prepared to twitch the curtains if necessary, and has said it's critical that people follow the guidelines and any local lockdown rules that are in place.

But will a circuit break work?

The jury is out. Rowland Kao, professor of veterinary epidemiology and data science at the University of Edinburgh, said, "While a two week lockdown will undoubtedly reduce the infection rate, it is uncertain whether something less than the total lockdown of March will have enough of an impact if schools and universities are allowed to continue to operate with in-person contact."

¹ Coronavirus: Tighter national rules considered for England by government. BBC News. 2020. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54199642.

² Heffer G. Coronavirus: Home Secretary Priti Patel "would call the police" if neighbours broke "rule of six." Sky News. 15 September 2020. <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-home-secretary-priti-patel-would-call-the-police-if-neighbours-broke-rule-of-six-12072281>.