

COVID-19

Kia ora koutou

We often reflect on the unique position we're in here in New Zealand Aotearoa to be able to investigate every case of COVID-19. Our small number of cases means we're able to investigate each one thoroughly, building a strong understanding of the possible source of infection. We're also able to share what we're learning with our international peers.

We're currently investigating the origins of the air crew infection and I'd like to thank and acknowledge Air New Zealand for their assistance with the investigation.

There's enormous public interest in every case and, in a small country like ours, this can make it difficult for people who test positive. Information about individual cases can be subject to intense media scrutiny.

Publishing case information is an important part of ensuring we maintain public trust and confidence in the Government's response to COVID-19, and we're very conscious of the need to continue to get the right balance between disclosure and privacy.

At the same time, we can't lose sight of the importance of protecting personal information while we seek to protect public health.

At an individual level, our latest NZ COVID Tracer app update (more on that below) should address some concerns and feedback we've had about privacy.

Thank you all for your continued support.

Ngā mihi nui,
Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Director-General of Health



Director-General of Health,
Dr Ashley Bloomfield

Additional testing to strengthen the border and protect workers

New measures took effect last week to increase the safety of border workers and further strengthen our barriers against COVID-19.

The new measures extend mandatory testing to some additional groups of workers at ports and airports that receive international arrivals, and increase the frequency of testing for some higher risk workers.

People who work at our ports and airports and managed isolation and quarantine facilities perform a critical role in ensuring the safety of all New Zealanders and we have a duty to keep them safe.

This additional testing builds on the regular programme of testing we already have in place for border workers and we don't expect this to mean a large number of new people to be tested.

I'd like to acknowledge the work of everyone involved in implementing the regular testing programme we now have at ports, airports, managed isolation and quarantine facilities throughout New Zealand Aotearoa. This has involved many different parties working together across the health sector, government agencies, and private sector employers.

It's been a large and complex undertaking to ensure we have identified and are regularly testing the people at highest risk of coming into contact with the virus, and that the testing frequency is based on what's reasonable and proportionate to the worker's level of risk.

Thank you for playing your part in keeping both our workers and our communities safe.

Read the details of the [COVID-19 Public Health Response \(Required Testing\) Amendment Order \(No 3\) 2020](#) on the Ministry of Health website.

COVID-19 Vaccine Update

As you've no doubt seen in the media, the work on the purchasing side of our COVID-19 Immunisation Programme continues with several more announcements regarding early stage trials and our advance purchase agreements (APAs).

While we do not know for certain when a vaccine will become available in New Zealand Aotearoa, the global effort to develop and trial a variety of vaccine candidates is well under way, with New Zealand Aotearoa entering into bilateral APAs with vaccine manufacturers.

Detailed planning is under way on the storage, refrigeration and distribution aspects of the programme and we will be following up with many of you shortly to seek your input on some of the finer details as this work progresses.

We are developing an immunisation plan and sequenced rollout strategy to ensure that the appropriate vaccines are made available to people at the right time. The approach will consider a range of potential scenarios and will ensure equity of outcomes, including protection for Māori, Pacific peoples and our most vulnerable population groups. Older people, disabled people, health workers, essential workers and border staff are key groups being considered as part of the planning.

We will be working closely with the range of relevant providers and stakeholders on what the rollout of potential vaccines might look like and what this means for each part of the health system.

Further guidance on N95 masks for MIQ workers

We've provided managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities with updated guidance on the use of N95/P2 particulate respirators for staff working in these facilities.

Protecting our frontline MIQ workers is a top priority in the ongoing effort to eliminate COVID-19 and this updated guidance will help do that.

The key change in the new guidance is that N95/P2 particulate respirators are recommended when 2 metre physical distancing cannot be maintained from a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19, for example if a MIQ facility worker has to enter a confined space, such as a guest's room.

An important principle is matching the recommended personal protective equipment to the specific situation and risk individuals may face, so wearing these masks will depend on the situation and won't always be required.

Surge and contingency planning for the holiday period

It's been an intense year and I'd like to acknowledge the increased workload and pressure that COVID-19 has created for us all. As the end of the year approaches, people are tired and I hope there will be an opportunity to rest your staff and take a well-deserved break.

Unfortunately, the virus is not taking a break and it is really important that we do not let our guard down over the summer period. I want to thank those of you who have already been working with the Ministry to ensure there will be adequate testing capacity and public health measures in place throughout New Zealand Aotearoa to ensure that Kiwis will be able to holiday safely. We are asking everyone to ensure that their plans recognise our collective need to continue to provide these services during the summer break.

We know from overseas experiences that the situation can change quickly and we're busy working to ensure there are surge and contingency plans in place for the upcoming holiday period.

Mask Exemption Card

In the last issue, I announced that the Ministry has created a face covering exemption card for people who have a disability or health condition and may not be able to wear a face covering comfortably.

People who believe they need this card can call Healthline for free on 0800 358 5453 for more information. Healthline will be able to provide advice to those who ring and provide a printable version of the card or supply users with a version that can be saved and shown from a smart phone. Healthline will be able to talk through options for those unable to access a printer or show it from their phones.

Alternatively, they can contact the Disabled Persons Assembly NZ. Phone 04 801 9100 or email info@dpa.org.nz.

Provision of PPE for general practices

During COVID-19 in general practices you may have been receiving personal protective equipment (PPE) from your local DHB. In some cases, you may have ordered PPE directly from the Ministry of Health via the online portal. This was done to ensure you received enough PPE for your facility to respond to COVID-19 outbreaks in your community.

To ensure each practice receives sufficient PPE to continue swabbing, and to avoid over supplying, the Ministry is now enabling all general practices to set up an account to order PPE directly from the Ministry through Healthcare Logistics (HCL) or OneLink in Alert Levels 2, 3, or 4, in line with the [principles of supply](#) outlined on the Ministry of Health website.

General practices and urgent medical care facilities conducting swabbing can order direct at all Alert Levels.

As Alert Levels change, so will your PPE requirements. We advise you to regularly check both the principles of supply and [Infection Prevention and Control Risk Assessment information](#), also available on our website. Any provider requiring PPE above and beyond this guidance will need to make their own arrangements to resource it.

Consistent with advice from the WHO, the Ministry of Health doesn't support the universal use of masks in primary care at Alert Levels 1 and 2. Our concern is that this type of mask wearing will impact negatively on the supply and stock of masks, which means in times of high global demand masks may not be available where and when they are most needed.

App gets the privacy seal of approval

The Privacy Commissioner's [endorsement of the NZ COVID Tracer app](#) recently is important reassurance that New Zealanders' privacy is protected when they use the app.

The latest update removes the need to provide an email address when registering, meaning people can get started with the app without needing to provide any personal information.

Users can choose exactly what personal information and contact details they want to register with the app and their digital diary of scanned QR codes is saved securely on their own phone where only they can see it. It also continues to be the user's choice whether to share their diary if a contact tracer gets in touch.

The value of the app has been well demonstrated over the past few months, in alerting hundreds of people who may have come into contact with a positive case to get tested, and for helping people who test positive for COVID-19 to identify where they've been.

As people start to move around the country more over the summer months, we'll be encouraging them to keep scanning the QR codes. Making it easier to use the app and safeguard their privacy will hopefully provide more incentive!