

Frequently Asked Questions

Omicron Frequently Asked Questions

This document answers frequently asked questions about Omicron.

This information applies from 25 January 2022

Information can be used for any government, agency, local government or relevant sector and business communications.

This is a living document that will be updated frequently. Information that changes or is added between versions will be highlighted.

Please ensure you are using the most up to date version.

This version was current at **6:30pm, 25 January 2022.**

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Frequently Asked Questions

Current Omicron situation update

Q. What is happening?

There have been 29 identified community cases associated with the January Omicron Cluster, all are in isolation. We know from overseas experience that we have a short window of around one to two weeks before Omicron takes off. Boosters and basic infection control can slow it down in this stage. Additional changes are being brought in to enhance mask wearing protocols at Red setting.

Q. What are the main changes relating to masks at Red?

Masks must now be worn at food and drink businesses, close proximity businesses, events and gatherings. Additionally face coverings need to be an actual mask, meaning no scarves, bandannas, or t-shirts pulled up over the face. More information and guidance will be made available soon.

Q. What about masks for workers?

All workers who are legally mandated to be vaccinated must now also wear a medical grade mask (for example a Type IIR/Level2 masks or above) while working in public facing roles. These include the widely available 'blue' medical-grade mask.

Q. When will changes come into effect?

11:59pm Thursday 3 February.

Q. What is being done to mitigate the spread of Omicron?

The strategy is to slow the spread of Omicron down. The whole of New Zealand is now at Red. At Red there are more mask requirements, and reduced gathering limits to lower the risk of picking up the virus and super spreader events. Red is not lockdown and the goal of moving to Red is to slow the spread of Omicron.

Q. How soon will Omicron be in other parts of the country?

The likelihood is very soon, if not already. Even if your part of the country doesn't yet have Omicron the evidence from overseas is that it will soon. It is already in both the North and South Islands and cases have been on a number of flights.

Q. Is a lockdown being implemented?

No. The traffic lights have been designed to allow businesses to open and operate at Red with further measures in place. It is different from the Alert level system.

Q. Should people get a booster dose now?

Yes, if you are eligible then advice is to get boosted right now. Evidence from overseas is that boosters significantly reduce the likelihood of getting sick and needing to go to hospital and also helps to reduce the transmission of the virus. **Around 60% of those eligible for a booster already have one.**

Q. Is the time to get a booster of 4 months being reduced?

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Not at this stage, however this is being kept under review. The Ministry of Health are consulting with their technical advisory group. Initially the booster was recommended to be months after a second jab, that was reduced to the current 4 months. New Zealand has one of the shortest gaps between second dose and booster. The U.S.A have a 5 month interval.

Q. What is the advice people should take now?

Get boosted, wear a mask in indoor settings and outside when you can't distance from others, and reduce contact as much as is practical. Also make sure you and your family have a buddy, such as a neighbour or a friend who can help you out by delivering things that you need if you do become unwell.

Q. What does this mean for hospitality, and events and gatherings?

Hospitality businesses can open, but are capped at 100 people with a My Vaccine Pass and customers must be seated and separated.

Events and gatherings for people with a My Vaccine Pass are reduced to 100. If people at an event do not have a My Vaccine Pass, that reduces further to 25.

Q. Is there more information about "test to work"?

The Government will be sharing more information about this on Wednesday.

Q. What are the phases for the current response?

Phase one is where we have up to 1000 cases a day or less. This scenario is expected in the initial stages of the outbreak, and to last for up to 14 days. And includes the tactics used with Delta such as the same contact tracing, isolation, and request that everyone who is symptomatic be tested at a community testing station or at a primary health provider. PCR will continue to be used. Rapid Antigen Tests may be integrated into these sites as required.

If you are required to isolate, you will receive advice and if needed the support to do so. At this stage you will need to isolate for 14 days if you are a case, and 10 days if you are contact.

Stage two will be a transition stage where the system is adjusted to focus much more on identifying those who are at greater risk of severe illness from Omicron, which will be a smaller percentage of cases.

Stage three is when cases are in the thousands, changes will then be made to contact tracing, the definition of contacts and isolation requirements. Details of this stage of the outbreak will be provided on Wednesday.

Q. Is financial support available for people who need to isolate?

Help and support including financial support is available for people who are isolating. Both the Leave Support Scheme and Short-Term Absence Payment are available.

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Q. What will the approach be for managing transmission of Omicron once it's in the community?

Minimisation of cases and flattening the curve, and protecting our most vulnerable, the health system and critical supply chains and infrastructure.

General Omicron information

Q. How quickly will it spread? Will we see spread like in Australia?

It will spread quickly. International experience is showing us that Omicron is more transmissible than Delta. However, we will continue to use our CPF and expect to see that help bend/flatten the curve.

Q. How many people will get Omicron?

We don't know how many people will get Omicron. Everyone should be prepared and have a plan in case they do catch the virus. We know from overseas that people are being hospitalised and dying at lower rates from Omicron than Delta.

But overall case numbers are much higher, meaning that health systems overseas have come under pressure. More time is required in order to fully appreciate the expected impacts arising from a large number of Omicron cases.

Q. How likely are we to start seeing infection numbers at the level we are seeing in Australia? (e.g. 50,000 cases per day)

The key observation from Australia is that case numbers can double every 2 to 4 days before levelling off. Some estimates predict that we could see a significant rise in case numbers in a matter of weeks from the first community case.

Q. Is it really more like the flu than measles?

Comparison to either disease is neither appropriate or helpful. Omicron has its own disease profile and features, and our public health strategy and approach is tailored to that.

Q. Can our hospitals cope with a large outbreak?

Currently planning is focussed on taking a preventative stance to keep Omicron at bay for as long as possible. By working to slow down the spread of Omicron we are therefore helping to support our healthcare system. Our hospitals are prepared for spread of COVID-19, and the CPF has been designed to keep the spread within the capacity of our hospital system. If absolutely necessary, we still have additional public health control measures such as localised lockdowns available in the response toolkit to protect people and the healthcare system.

Q. What does current modelling predict?

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The modelling is highly variable predicting anything from the thousands to tens of thousands of cases per day.

What happens if I get Omicron?

Q. What do I need to do if I test positive via a PCR test?

If you have a PCR test, you will be notified by your local public health unit of your test result. They will let you know next steps for investigating your case and notification of any contacts.

Q. What if I test positive on an at home or work supplied RAT?

A digital solution is being developed for unsupervised tests so people can record the result of their test online. You will need to register as a case and complete the online portal that will be available to identify contacts.

Q. Do I need to complete isolation away from my family/flatmates? What does that mean for them?

Limit contact with others you live with for example, sleep by yourself and limit the time you spend in shared spaces. If you cannot, you should stay at least 2 metres apart and wear a face covering that covers your nose and mouth when near others.

You will need to isolate for at least 14 days while you recover from COVID-19 and be symptom-free for 72 hours.

Anyone in your household will need to remain in isolation for at least 10 days after you have been released as a case. This means they will need to be in isolation for longer than you.

Q. How do I know when or if I need to go to the hospital?

Those that can safely self-manage at home will have a range of guidance to enable them to do this, including instructions on how to access emergency assessment should their condition deteriorate at any time.

Q. Are people who haven't had boosters at more risk?

International evidence on the effectiveness of 'boosters' for protecting against infection, symptomatic disease, and severe illness/hospitalisation indicates increased protection against Omicron, though the evidence is still emerging.

Government Response

Q. Is the vaccine still effective in protecting infection and transmission?

Three doses of the Pfizer vaccine appear to provide good protection against Omicron, but the evidence is still emerging.

Q. Will there be lockdowns / boundaries?

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Lockdowns are not part of the COVID-19 Protection Framework. Localised lockdowns will be kept as a backup and if considered necessary but won't reappear in the way they did in 2020 and 2021. There are other methods to slowdown Omicron including – mask use, social distancing, reducing gathering sizes.

Q. Should we return to the Alert level system instead of persevering with the CPF?

No. The protection framework was designed to help us reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in the community, without the need for large scale lockdowns.

Q. How will COVID-19 care be prioritised against other health services (including those that are non-urgent, but still important)?

As it does now, the health system will continue to prioritise services based on capacity and clinical need. Planning is underway to support increased cases of COVID-19 in the community.

Q. Will there be changes to the public health approach?

Case and contact management is under constant review and further changes to the case and contact isolation periods, as has been seen in Australia, may be recommended.

Q. Will contacts still have to isolate?

The period of isolation for cases and contacts is being monitored and will be reviewed if we are seeing a high volume of cases.

Q. Will there be a change to how contacts are identified?

The Ministry of Health are anticipating that due to the high number of cases, there is a need to narrow the definition of a close contact. A review of contact definition has narrowed the definition to: "living with someone who has COVID 19, have spent 4 hours or longer with someone in a home or health or aged care environment or education setting since they developed COVID 19, or under exceptional circumstances determined by a Medical Officer of Health".

Q. How many contacts will cases have? How many of them are usually infected?

The number of contacts each case has varies greatly depending on the case's movements during the infectious period and their social environment. In general terms, household contacts (or household-like contacts) are the most likely to be infected. At this stage, locations interest will continue to be published, this will be reviewed if case numbers begins to increase significantly.

Q. Do we need to alter the definition of 'vaccinated' to include a booster/3rd shot?

In the interim, double vaccinated people will be considered vaccinated however, as the rollout of booster shots progresses and more of the general population are eligible, careful consideration is being given to when a definition change may be required.

Q. What will you do to encourage uptake of boosters in the immediate term?

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Vaccination continues to be an important tool in our fight against COVID-19 and a booster shot will reinforce the effectiveness against Omicron. The Ministry is focussing on increasing vaccination and booster coverage, including for children, with a focus on vulnerable and high-risk populations.

As soon as someone is eligible for their booster they should book in and get it immediately and not wait until Omicron makes its way into the community. This will help offer the best protection against Omicron.

Testing

Q. What is the update on RATs?

There are 83 million RATs on order. Currently there is a global shortage of RATs. The Ministry of Health has 4.6 million RATs in the country and have confirmed delivery of an additional 14.6 million over the next 5 weeks. There are an additional 22 million over this same period.

Q. Why are RATs taking so long to arrive in NZ?

The Ministry of Health have been working to secure supplies of RATs and are working towards getting confirmation for delivery of orders. There is competitive global demand for RATs. Currently RATs are being used by 20 businesses in NZ and in healthcare settings for example for visitors to Emergency Departments.

Q. How do I get a rapid test?

Rapid antigen testing sits within a range of testing modalities for detection and diagnosis of COVID-19 work is underway to further increase the availability of rapid antigen tests across a number of settings. Whether you need to complete a PCR or RAT test will depend on your exposure to a positive case and any symptoms you might be experiencing, and the volume of cases at the time.

Q. What will the general testing approach be during an omicron outbreak?

PCR tests will not be able to be processed quickly enough for cases to be identified and isolated rapidly to contain the spread. Testing will shift to using supervised and unsupervised Rapid Antigen Testing (RAT) in both clinical and non-clinical settings as results are available within minutes of taking a test.

Q. Who will rapid tests be available to? How do I know if I need a rapid or PCR test?

In a situation of more than 1,000 cases a day, we expect Rapid Antigen Tests will be used more frequently. If you are symptomatic or need to be tested to access a workplace or service, you will be guided at the time on which test is best for you.

Q. What will happen if we run out of RAT tests?

The Ministry of Health is constantly monitoring supply, and sourcing additional tests where needed. **Currently there is a global shortage of RATs.**

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. How many people will be getting rapid tests? Do we have supply of rapid tests in the country?

The Ministry of Health are actively managing the supply of tests into the country.

Q. Will you have to be symptomatic to access a test?

Generally, you need to be experiencing symptoms to meet the testing threshold, however if you work in a high-risk setting you or others may need to undertake surveillance testing.

Q. How will MoH manage capacity and capability across the Health system during an outbreak of Omicron?

Prioritising and sharing hospital resources alongside building up of system capacity/capability will allow the health system to manage more cases and still provide a continuity of care during a community outbreak of Omicron.

Care in the community

Q. What is the current capacity of the model?

Officials estimate the current model can support a reasonable increase in the amount of new cases a week.

Q. How do I get groceries or other services while I'm isolating?

If you cannot manage with help from friends and family and need support, your COVID-19 welfare guide and the COVID-19 welfare phone line can help you. More information and contact information can be found on the Unite Against COVID-19 [website](#).

Q. What will the bar for support be? Who qualifies for what kind of support?

The Welfare response under the Care in Community model is specifically targeted towards those who are directed to self-isolate and who are assessed as requiring welfare support through an initial rapid assessment.

Supply chains/business continuity

Q. How will we protect services critical to supply chains and essential services?

Work is underway to identify infrastructure and services that will be critical during an outbreak, and support sector preparedness. These services will be supported to maintain business continuity where necessary.

Q. What will be defined as critical infrastructure and services?

These are infrastructure and key sectors where disruption of service would result in significant adverse impacts felt across New Zealand, or large parts of our communities. Work is proceeding at pace to precisely define these, and to consider what supports may be appropriate to facilitate their continued operation.

Q. How confident are you that critical lifeline services can continue to function through Omicron?

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Work is focussed on ensuring these critical services can do so.

Q. What guidance will be provided to businesses/support for preparedness?

Guidance is already available for Businesses on MoH and Business.govt websites. As more detail is finalised it will be distributed via existing channels and through proactive engagement with sector representatives.

Economic supports

Q. What does the future of economic supports look like under Omicron? Will these be able to be operationalised quickly?

Support to business through previous COVID outbreaks has taken a range of forms and functions and work is underway to consider whether and how this support could be used for the anticipated Omicron outbreak.

Reconnecting

Q. What is the update for Reconnecting New Zealand?

Cabinet has not changed any of the dates already decided on (i.e. from the end of February). The plan was to re-open to Australia first for New Zealanders in Aus. We delayed reopening because of Omicron to allow us to progress the rollout of the booster and paediatric vaccine. We are looking at all the evidence now and will take a decision in the coming weeks on when to start reopening the border.

Q. Borders and Omicron, will MIQ be needed?

Borders have served us well and have slowed Omicron's entry into the community. We have been working towards allowing for self-isolation for eligible returnees. A staged approach is planned to take place.

Q. Why are we delaying re-opening if Omicron is milder?

In December, we delayed the initial stages of reopening to allow us more time to learn about Omicron and for the rollout of boosters to progress.

What we see from overseas is that while the proportion of people that will end up in hospital with Omicron is lower, the actual number could be the same or higher than for Delta, just because so many people get infected.

Q. Should we delay reopening until we reach certain targets for kids to be vaccinated and people to receive boosters?

We are looking at what we need in place to make reopening as safe as possible and will let you know when Cabinet has taken a decision.

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Key contacts for official advice

Immigration

Visit www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/covid-19 or call the Immigration Contact Centre (6am – 10pm, Monday – Friday (NZST) from landlines only on 0508 558 855, or Auckland 09 914 4100, Wellington 04 910 9915, or from overseas +64 9 914 4100

Kiwis returning from overseas

Managed Isolation and Quarantine www.miq.govt.nz or call on +64 4 888 1670 if you're overseas (rates will apply) or 0800 476 647 if you're in New Zealand (calls are free). Hours are 0800 to 2200 hours (NZST), seven days a week.

All New Zealanders overseas are encouraged to see the advice and register on www.safetravel.govt.nz

Healthline 0800 358 5453 or +64 9 358 5453

Translations

For resources in other languages, visit <https://covid19.govt.nz/updates-and-resources/translations/>

Accessible information

Information and advice in other formats for people with particular accessibility needs <https://covid19.govt.nz/updates-and-resources/accessible-information/>

Pacific communities

For information to support Pacific communities, visit <https://www.facebook.com/MinistryforPacificPeoples/>

Transport

For information on transport go to www.transport.govt.nz/about/covid-19 or email essentialtravel@transport.govt.nz

Unite Against Covid 19

Website www.covid19.govt.nz
Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/UniteAgainstCOVID19/>
LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/company/uniteagainstcovid19/>
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