



11th January 2022

Mr Stephen Donnelly TD
Minister for Health
Department of Health
Block 1, Miesian Plaza
50-58 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin 2

Via email to Private Secretary to the Minister for Health

Dear Minister

Department officials met yesterday with the NVRL and HSE colleagues, including the HPSC, AMRIC and those involved in the operational management of COVID-19 testing, to review current public health guidance in the context of the evolving epidemiological situation and available international guidance.

It should be noted that the ECDC has recently updated its guidance on the public health management of COVID-19 cases and close contacts, which is framed in light of available evidence, international experience of COVID-19 and expert views. The ECDC highlights that the available scientific evidence to support any change to the existing quarantine and isolation guidance is currently limited. The updated guidance from the ECDC, considering the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the EU/EEA, aims to provide options for adapting quarantine and isolation, particularly when countries face high or extreme pressure on healthcare systems and other functions in society, including essential services.

In view of the very large volumes of disease that continue to be experienced in Ireland, and taking account of the updated ECDC guidance, it is proposed to make the following changes to advice for COVID-19 cases and close contacts.

Individuals who have symptoms of COVID-19

- Anyone with symptoms should immediately self-isolate and get tested. Those aged 0-3 and over 39 years old and all healthcare workers should seek a PCR test. All others should use repeated antigen tests – anyone with a positive antigen test result should regard it as definitive and register it with the HSE (i.e. PCR confirmation not required)
- Regardless of negative test results, all should continue to self-isolate until 48 hours after symptoms have substantially or fully resolved
- All individuals aged over 12 years old with symptoms of COVID-19 should use a well-fitted medical grade or FFP2 face mask. Children aged 9-12 years old should wear a well-fitted mask
- While symptomatic individuals are awaiting a test (PCR or antigen), close contacts should operate on the basis that the symptomatic individual has COVID-19 until the test result is available.



Individuals who have a positive COVID-19 test result

- Self-isolation should commence from date of onset of symptoms or, if asymptomatic, from date of first positive test result (antigen or PCR) and continue for a minimum of seven days. Exit from self-isolation after seven days is on the basis that symptoms have substantially or fully resolved for the final two of those seven days
- All individuals aged over 12 years old with a positive COVID-19 test result should use a well-fitted medical grade or FFP2 face mask for ten days. Children aged 9-12 years old should wear a well-fitted mask for ten days.

Close contacts (aged over 12 years old) of COVID-19 cases

- Close contacts aged over 12 years old who have had their immunity boosted are not required to restrict their movements. They should take regular antigen tests over seven days, with the last test on day seven. They should also wear FFP2 or medical grade masks for ten days
- Close contacts aged over 12 years old who have not had their immunity boosted should restrict their movements for seven days. They should take regular antigen tests over seven days, with the last test on day seven. They should wear FFP2 or medical grade masks for ten days. It should be noted that the question of recommending booster vaccination for children aged 12-15 years old will shortly be subject to consideration by NIAC.

Immunity may be considered boosted if an individual is either at least seven days post booster/third vaccine dose or has a combination of primary vaccination and recent infection detected on antigen or PCR testing (within the last three months).

Close contacts (aged 0-12 years old) of COVID-19 cases

- Household close contacts aged 0-12 years old should restrict movements for seven days. Household close contacts aged 4-12 years old should also take regular antigen tests over seven days, with the last test on day seven. Those aged 0-3 years old are not advised to undergo testing unless they develop symptoms (PCR test if symptomatic). Those aged 9-12 years old should wear a well-fitted mask for ten days
- Non-household close contacts aged 0-12 years old are not required to restrict movements or test unless they develop symptoms. Asymptomatic children who are school/childcare pod contacts of cases will continue to be offered antigen testing through the existing HSE programme. Those aged 9-12 years old should wear a well-fitted mask for ten days.

The period of restricted movements for close contacts applies from date of last contact with positive case if known or, if not, from date of notification as a contact. Close contacts of any age who have recovered following COVID-19 detected by a PCR or antigen test carried out since 1st December 2021 are not required to restrict movements or test if asymptomatic. If they become symptomatic, they should immediately self-isolate, get tested and wear a mask as appropriate.



Given the high levels of infection across the country, it is particularly important that cases and close contacts continue to follow the public health advice issued to the general population. Cases and close contacts exiting isolation/restricted movements after seven days (or for a period of ten days for close contacts not required to restrict movements as set out above) will be advised to:

- limit close contact with other people outside their household, especially in crowded, enclosed or poorly ventilated spaces
- wear an appropriate face mask/face covering in crowded, enclosed or poorly ventilated spaces and where they are in close contact with other people
- take an antigen test before entering crowded, enclosed or poorly ventilated spaces and prior to having close contact with other people from outside their household
- avoid contact with anyone who is at higher risk of severe illness if infected with COVID-19
- work from home unless it is essential to attend in person
- follow all public health protective measures.

It should be noted that the recommended changes to advice which reduce the period of restricted movements for close contacts will enable such individuals to attend their booster vaccine appointment, thereby facilitating increased uptake in the vaccination programme overall.

It is recommended that, once implemented, these changes continue in place until 27th February 2022, noting the potential for earlier review should this be required by the evolving epidemiological situation.

The recommendations as outlined are consistent with the advice on face masks provided by the NPHET following its most recent meeting on 6th January 2022.

Your early direction on the above advices would be appreciated as it will be important to communicate these proposed changes to the HSE such that they can begin to prepare for implementation as quickly as possible.

Yours sincerely

Dr Tony Holohan
Chief Medical Officer

Designated Public Official under Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015