

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department of Health

CHANGES TO COVID-19 TESTING

Published at 2.00 pm on Friday 19 August 2022.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I wish to provide a further update following publication of my Department's COVID-19 Test, Trace and Protect Transition Plan on 24 March 2022 and subsequent related announcements. The Plan set out indicative timelines for transition and committed to keep COVID-19 testing arrangements under continuous review taking account of the pandemic trajectory.

On the 27 July, as a precautionary measure and taking account of the trajectory of the pandemic at that time, I announced an extension to the advice for the general population to test if they developed symptoms of COVID-19 and extended the availability of COVID-19 lateral flow tests for that purpose into August.

We have continued to monitor the surveillance and epidemiological data very closely. After an increase in COVID-19 cases mainly due to a wave of infections caused by Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 sub-variants during June and into July, all the signs now are that we have passed the peak of the latest wave and that levels of infection in the community are falling.

The most recent data provided by the Office for National Statistics Covid Infection Survey which tests a sample of people in Northern Ireland suggests that in the week up to 8 August 2022, 1 in 50 (2%) people in Northern Ireland had COVID-19. This is down from 1:17 (6%) in the week to 25 July which was the previous week reported. Hospital admissions and occupancy are also falling. The number of people in hospital requiring intensive care or respiratory support has also fallen.

The overall risk of serious illness, hospitalisation and death for those who contract COVID-19 has been much lower than during previous waves. This was the case throughout the recent period of high prevalence. There is no doubt that protection against the worst impacts of the COVID-19 virus is largely due to the success of our vaccination programme – which continues to be our primary line of defence - and the use of new COVID-19 treatments. I would again urge everyone who is eligible for a booster as part of our autumn programme to come forward as soon as it becomes available.

In view of the latest evidence, effective from 22 August, those in the general population with symptoms of COVID-19 will no longer be advised to take a lateral flow test. Free lateral flow tests will no longer be available for this purpose. This is in keeping with our COVID-19 transition plan published in March 2022. The Plan signalled that, following a period of transition, we would no longer advise people in the general population to take a COVID-19 test if they develop symptoms and we would move to general public health advice to reduce the spread of infection. We have now reached that point.

People who may be eligible for new COVID-19 treatments will continue to be advised to take a lateral flow test and report the result. People who work in health and social care settings will also continue to be advised to test if they develop symptoms. Free tests will remain available for these purposes.

Our objectives moving forward will continue to have a clear focus on protecting the most vulnerable from severe illness from COVID-19 by enabling access to vaccination, supporting clinical care and treatments, and safeguarding against the risk of infection.

The following advice will remain in place for now:

- LFD testing for those with symptoms who are potentially eligible for COVID-19 treatments.
- LFD testing for those without symptoms who work in or visit others in care homes and hospitals.
- LFD testing for those without symptoms providing close personal care to someone in their own home at higher risk should they contract COVID-19.
- LFD testing for those who are asked to test by a healthcare professional.
- Health & Social Care Workers will continue to test and isolate in line with current guidance.
- Testing to support clinical care and treatment in line with current guidance

Testing in all of the above areas is kept under active review and is subject to further change.

We know that the threat from COVID-19 has not gone away. We can expect to see further waves of infection as we move into the autumn and winter and that new variants will emerge.

As such, we will maintain effective surveillance to monitor the progression of the virus; to spot early any deterioration in the overall situation, and to identify the emergence of new variants or mutations. There will also continue to be a focus on outbreak management and on contingency planning to ensure we stand ready to deliver an effective future response as and when that is required. As always, any further actions and response will be proportionate and will be based on the prevailing context and public health risk assessment at that time.

Continuing protective behaviours

This statement today aligns with our existing advice and communications on protective behaviours to reduce the spread of respiratory viruses including COVID-19.

Public health advice remains that individuals with a high temperature or who have respiratory symptoms and do not feel well enough to go to work or carry out normal activities, are strongly advised to stay at home and minimise contact with others until they are well in order to help avoid spreading illness. They are advised to work from home if possible and to talk to their employer about options if this is not feasible.

They should also continue to take precautions such as wearing a face mask, particularly in crowded indoor places, and regularly washing their hands.

People with symptoms should avoid contact with those known to them to be vulnerable and should not visit others in health and social care settings. This is the advice for people with symptoms of respiratory infections, not just COVID-19.

As we move forward together, and continue learning to live alongside COVID-19, I would urge people to use personal judgment, to act responsibly and to take sensible actions to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory infections. This in turn will help to protect those who are most vulnerable.

Ongoing monitoring and review

The announcement today takes account of the current disease trajectory and public health risk assessment in relation to COVID-19. My Department will continue to monitor the situation closely on an ongoing basis beyond summer and into autumn/ winter and will continue to keep all advice in relation to testing under review.

I will not hesitate to take action, including bringing back test and trace measures where I feel these are proportionate and necessary, in order to protect our population and our most vulnerable.

This statement is being issued during Northern Ireland Assembly recess in order to keep members informed.