

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

CHANGES TO TESTING AND ISOLATION FOR COVID-19

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Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I wish to provide an update to the Assembly further to publication of my Department's *COVID-19 Test, Trace and Protect Transition Plan* on 24 March 2022. 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.

It is clear that after a period of reducing prevalence we are now seeing a rise in Covid-19 prevalence again across Northern Ireland. This is due in large part to the emergence of the more transmissible BA4 and BA5 Omicron sub-variants, which are becoming dominant across the UK. Other contributory factors are waning immunity, increased social mixing and more relaxed behaviours. Thankfully, the evidence from a number of countries indicates that the new sub-variants do not appear to be causing more severe illness at this time. There are also early and encouraging signs that the peak of this current wave may not be far away.

That said, we continue to see significant pressures in our hospitals and the contribution of COVID, even though admission numbers are smaller than in previous waves, adds to these pressures.

It is expected that prevalence will be reduced by the school summer holidays and by an increase in time spent outdoors.

Whilst prevalence continues to be relatively high, thankfully the overall risk of serious illness, hospitalisation and death for those who contract COVID-19 is much lower than during previous waves. This has been the case for a number of months now and is due in large part to the delivery of our hugely successful vaccination and booster programme, and the continuing availability and use of innovative antiviral treatments.

In April 2022 I announced a step change to testing with the removal of asymptomatic testing for the general population. Indicative timescales outlined in the Transition Plan also prepared for the removal of symptomatic testing for the general population on or before the 30 June 2022. I stipulated that testing policy would be kept under review during the period up to the end of June. I have considered the current data and due to the current prevalence of COVID-19, as a precautionary measure, I am extending current lateral flow testing availability for a further month up to the end of July.

This will continue to help support people to take protective measures and to help protect the vulnerable against the risk of infection and severe illness.

From the 1 July the following advice will remain in place:

- LFD testing for those with symptoms including importantly those 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 without symptoms who are asked to test by a healthcare professional
- Health & Social Care Workers will continue to test in line with current guidance
- Testing to support clinical care and treatment in line with current guidance

As always, this testing will be kept under review and I will provide a further update towards the end of July.

I wish to take this opportunity to update the Assembly on a number of other important changes. These changes aim to ensure our approach to testing and our public health advice remains proportionate and effective at this stage of the pandemic and is in line with the risk currently posed by the virus.

Updated advice for those with a positive COVID-19 test result

As I have set out, COVID-19 testing using LFDs will remain for those with symptoms in the general population and for some specific groups without symptoms in order to protect the highest risk settings and to support clinical care.

I am also announcing today updated isolation advice for those that have a positive COVID-19 test result.

Adults with a positive coronavirus test result will be advised to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for five days after the day of the test, or from the day symptoms started. As children tend to be less infectious than adults, this period is reduced to three days for children under 18 years of age.

As a precautionary measure, while people are no longer advised to self-isolate for 10 days, they should avoid contact with individuals who are at higher risk from COVID for the full 10 days - especially individuals with a weakened immune system - to make sure that you are no longer infectious.

They should also avoid visiting others in care homes, hospitals and other health and social care settings.

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

Testing to end isolation is no longer advised.

This updated advice for positive COVID cases seeks to strike the right balance at this stage of the pandemic between reducing transmission, protecting the vulnerable and mitigating the disruption caused by longer periods of isolation. The reducing risk to the general population, high levels of vaccination and the availability of COVID-19 treatments for eligible groups enable us to reduce the self-isolation period and remove the need for a negative test to release from isolation.

Full details of where testing continues to be recommended and the updated isolation advice is outlined on NI Direct. All measures will continue to be kept under review.

Symptoms of respiratory illness including COVID-19

The clinical presentation and symptoms of COVID-19 have changed significantly since the start of the pandemic. Cough, temperature and loss of smell and taste were the symptoms that best predicted that an individual had COVID-19 at earlier stages in the pandemic, although we have always advised that there were other symptoms of COVID-19.

Currently, the most common symptoms of Covid-19 are similar to other respiratory viruses such as flu.

The restrictions in place to control the spread of COVID-19 in earlier stages of the pandemic greatly reduced the spread of other respiratory viruses such as flu. These viruses did not circulate widely during these periods. This is no longer the case and other previously common respiratory viruses – such as RSV - are now circulating again in the community. These viruses have the potential to cause serious illness in some vulnerable groups.

As such, public health advice for those with symptoms of respiratory illness will move away from a focus on the three cardinal symptoms associated with COVID, and will instead now focus on the wider group of symptoms associated with a range of respiratory viruses, including COVID-19, and on responsible behaviours for those with symptoms.

The wider list of symptoms of respiratory infections including COVID-19 are:

- continuous cough
- high temperature, fever or chills
- loss of, or change in, your normal sense of taste or smell
- shortness of breath
- unexplained tiredness, lack of energy
- muscle aches or pains that are not due to exercise
- not wanting to eat or not feeling hungry
- headache that is unusual or longer lasting than usual
- sore throat, stuffy or runny nose
- diarrhoea, feeling sick or being sick

The adoption of this wider list of symptoms better reflects the current clinical presentation of COVID-19.

As I set out above, LFD testing will continue to be advised and tests continue to be available for people with these symptoms in order to test for COVID-19.

Those who test positive for COVID-19 should stay at home in line with the updated guidance set out above.

However, someone with a negative COVID-19 test result may still have a respiratory virus infection which can spread and cause illness in others.

Even with a negative COVID test result, public health advice continues to be 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 should particularly avoid contact with those considered vulnerable and should not visit others in health and social care settings if they have a temperature or are feeling unwell with symptoms of respiratory illness.

This is the advice for all people with symptoms of respiratory infections, not just Covid.

To summarise - to help minimise the spread of all respiratory viruses, the same general public health advice applies in relation to all respiratory virus symptoms – even if your COVID test is negative - heed your symptoms, follow the updated advice and take appropriate action to protect others.

As we move forward together, and continue learning to live life COVID aware, 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.

Further detail of the list of symptoms of respiratory viruses including COVID-19 and what to do should you develop symptoms can be found on NI Direct.

Contact Tracing undertaken by the Public Health Agency

Contact tracing for the general population has been phased out over the past couple of months and the Contact Tracing Service has stood down from 30 June 2022.

Contact tracing has been one of the key interventions used over the last two years to help suppress transmission and reduce the impact of COVID-19 on our society.

I wish to place on record my thanks to the staff in the Public Health Agency and the wider health service who have worked in the Contact Tracing Service for their exceptional professionalism and dedication over the past two challenging years. I would also like to thank everyone who engaged with the Service, provided details of their contacts and complied with the guidance.

The Public Health Agency will retain the ability to deliver a proportionate testing and contact tracing response in the future should there be a significant outbreak, wave or emergence of a new variant.

Continuing with protective behaviours

It is over two years since Northern Ireland and the other UK regions went into lockdown due to COVID-19. In the intervening period we have all learnt much about the virus and what can be done to reduce its impact. We have reviewed and adapted our position at each step of the way in relation to many aspects of the pandemic response.

At this time, the overall risk posed by the virus to the general public has changed and that is largely due to our vaccination programme and antivirals and therapeutics which will continue to be key in the fight against COVID-19.

My Department will continue to monitor the situation closely and will continue to keep all advice in relation to testing under review. I will not hesitate to take necessary and proportionate action as we move ahead into autumn and winter, including bringing back some or all test and trace measures where I feel these are proportionate and necessary, in order to protect our population and our most vulnerable.

Any finally my thanks are to every citizen of Northern Ireland: your sacrifices and your continued collective efforts are why we are at this point of the pandemic. Keep taking the simple steps to keep us in control and keep those more vulnerable safe. Let's continue to keep COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses in check.