

COVID-19 timeline
23 March 2020

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Prime Minister: COVID-19 Alert Level increased



RT HON JACINDA ARDERN(/MINISTER/RT-HON-JACINDA-ARDERN)

Prime Minister (/portfolio/labour-led-government-2017-2020/prime-minister)

Good afternoon

The Cabinet met this morning to discuss our next actions in the fight against COVID-19.

Like the rest of the world, we are facing the potential for devastating impacts from this virus. But, through decisive action, and through working together, we have a small window to get ahead of it.

On Saturday I announced a COVID-19 alert level system and placed New Zealand at Alert Level 2.

I also said we should all be prepared to move quickly. Now is the time to put our plans into action.

We are fortunate to still be some way behind the majority of overseas countries in terms of cases, but the trajectory is clear. Act now, or risk the virus taking hold as it has elsewhere.

We currently have 102 cases. But so did Italy once. Now the virus has overwhelmed their health system and hundreds of people are dying every day.

The situation here is moving at pace, and so must we.

We have always said we would act early. Today 36 new cases were announced. While the majority of these cases continue to be linked to overseas travel in some way, I can also confirm, as did the Director General of Health, that we have 2 cases where public health officials have been unable to find how they came in contact with COVID-19. On that basis, we now consider that there is transmission within our communities.

If community transmission takes off in New Zealand the number of cases will double every five days. If that happens unchecked, our health system will be inundated, and tens of thousands of New Zealanders will die.

There is no easy way to say that – but it is the reality we have seen overseas – and the possibility we must now face here.

Together, we must stop that happening, and we can.

Right now we have a window of opportunity to break the chain of community transmission – to contain the virus – to stop it multiplying and to protect New Zealanders from the worst.

Our plan is simple. We can stop the spread by staying at home and reducing contact.

Now is the time to act.

Cabinet met today and agreed that, effective immediately, we will move to Alert Level 3 nationwide.

As the time required to ensure essential services are in place, we will move to Level 4.

taken lightly. But this is our best chance to slow the virus and to save lives.

Let me set out what these changes will mean for everyone.

Supermarkets, doctors, pharmacies, service stations, access to essential banking services, will all be available throughout New Zealand at every alert level. If you do not have immediate needs, do not go to the supermarket. It will be there for you today, tomorrow, and the day after that. We must give time for supermarkets to restock their shelves, there will be enough for everyone if we shop normally.

In the meantime, we will be working through practices like those used overseas to make sure that social distancing is maintained at supermarkets when people are undertaking essential shops.

Non-essential businesses in New Zealand must now close. All bars, restaurants, cafes, gyms, cinemas, pools, museums, libraries, playgrounds and any other place where the public congregate must close their face-to-face function.

Over the next 48 hours as we move to Level 4, takeaway services must move to close their operations.

All indoor and outdoor events cannot proceed.

In short: we are all now preparing to go into self isolation as a nation. Just as you've seen with other countries.

Staying at home is essential. It's a simple but highly effective way to constrain the virus – it denies it places to go, and will help give our healthcare system a fighting chance.

So over the next 48 hours every workplace must implement alternative ways of working, people must work from home so that interactions with others are limited.

Essential services will need to put in place alternative ways of working that ensure physical distancing of staff of 2 metres, or utilise appropriate Personal Protective Equipment.

Schools will be closed from tomorrow, except to the children of essential workers such as our doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers and police – this will give them time to plan. This will be temporary, and schools will close entirely from midnight Wednesday.

The school term break will be brought forward. For the remainder of this week and through the term break schools will establish ways to deliver teaching online and remotely. All students across the country are currently being given information on this decision for their parents, including the list of who is considered an essential service. This will be communicated directly to parents.

To be absolutely clear we are now asking all New Zealanders who are outside essential services to stay at home, and to stop all interactions with others outside of those in your household.

We understand that self isolation is a daunting prospect. So we are being practical. You can leave your home for fresh air, a walk, exercise. To take your children outside. But remember the simple principle. It must be solitary. We are asking that you only spend time with those you are in self isolation with. And if you are outside, keep your distance from others. That means 2 metres at all times. This is the single most important thing we can do right now to stop further community transmission.

Travel around New Zealand will also change.

Over the next 48 hours, people will need to get home, be it locally or throughout the country. We have asked all air transport providers to ensure social distancing for that period. After 48 hours we will be moving to air travel only applying to the transport of people undertaking essential services and the transport of freight.

Public transport will also begin to transition over the next 48 hours and will only be available for those working in essential services, for medical reasons, and to move essential goods – including ferry services between the North and South Island.

Further details on the transition we are all now making will be made publicly available on the COVID-19 website.

Now I want to share with you what will happen while we are all in Alert Level 4 to get ahead of COVID-19.

We will continue to vigorously contact trace every single case. Testing will continue at pace to help us understand the current number of cases in New Zealand and where they are based. If we flush out the cases we already have and see transmission slow, we will potentially be able to move areas out of Level 4 over time.

because the virus is already in our community. But these new measures can slow the virus down and prevent our health system from being overwhelmed and ultimately save lives.

To be successful though, to stop community transmission which has a lag time, these measures will need to be in place for 4 weeks. Again, I want to reiterate, you will be able to make regular visits to essential services in that time.

If we after those 4 weeks we have been successful, we hope we will be able to ease up on restrictions. If we haven't, we'll find ourselves living with them for longer. That's why sticking to the rules matters. If we don't – if you hang out with that friend at a park or see that family member for lunch, you risk spreading COVID-19 and extending everyone's time in Level 4.

Our low number of cases compared to the rest of the world gives us a chance, but does not mean we have escaped. I do not underestimate what I am asking New Zealanders to do. It's huge. And I know it will feel daunting. But I wanted to share with you the stark choice we face.

New medical modelling considered by the Cabinet today suggests that without the measures I have just announced up to tens of thousands of New Zealanders could die from COVID-19.

Everything you will all give up for the next few weeks, all of the lost contact with others, all of the isolation, and difficult time entertaining children – it will literally save lives. Thousands of lives.

The worst case scenario is simply intolerable. It would represent the greatest loss of New Zealanders' lives in our country's history. I will not take that chance.

I would rather make this decision now, and save those lives, and be in lockdown for a shorter period, than delay, and see New Zealanders lose loved ones and their contact with each other for an even longer period. I hope you are all with me on that.

Together we have an opportunity to contain the spread and prevent the worst.

I cannot stress enough the need for every New Zealander to follow the advice I have laid out today.

The Government will do all it can to protect you. Now I'm asking you to do everything you can to protect us all. None of us can do this alone.

Your actions will be critical to our collective ability to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Failure to play your part in the coming days will put the lives of others at risk. There will be no tolerance for that and we will not hesitate in using enforcement powers if needed.

We're in this together and must unite against COVID-19.

I am in no doubt that the measures I have announced today will cause unprecedented economic and social disruption. But they are necessary.

I have one final message. Be kind. I know people will want to act as enforcers. And I understand that, people are afraid and anxious. We will play that role for you. What we need from you, is to support one another. Go home tonight and check in on your neighbours. Start a phone tree with your street. Plan how you'll keep in touch with one another. We will get through this together, but only if we stick together. Be strong and be kind.

I am now going to hand over to the Finance Minister to set out the additional support measures agreed by Cabinet today to provide income guarantees to those whose livelihood is disrupted by the virus.

Straight after that Minister Hipkins will talk through some of the specific decisions as they relate to education.

Following that we are making available Commissioner of Police, Mike Bush, who has been playing a key role in the operational side, and John Ombler the Controller of the All of Government response to speak with you and answer additional questions.

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