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COVID-19 timeline
20 April 2020

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Prime Minister's remarks on COVID-19 alert level decision – April 20



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

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

Tēnā koutou katoa

Over the past few weeks I have often used my time at this podium to acknowledge the people on the frontline.

Today I want to remember the people in New Zealand who have lost someone to COVID-19, or the many more who had the terror of almost losing someone.

Throughout this pandemic there have been individuals who I have tracked the progress of. I didn't know their names, but I knew their status. And I still get a phone call for every individual person we lose to COVID-19.

We may be amongst a small number of countries where that is still able to happen, where the numbers we have lost have been small, but we cannot forget that every number is someone's father, someone's mum, a relative and a friend and someone we have all been united in an effort to protect and to save.

And that is why we as a country took on the challenge of staring down COVID-19 – because we believed that decisive action, going hard and going early, gave us the very best chance of stamping out the virus. And it has.

We have done what very few countries have been able to do. We have stopped a wave of devastation.

Our transmission rate, the number of cases each person with the virus passes it onto, is now 0.48, less than half a person each. Overseas the average is 2.5 people. We have amongst the lowest number of confirmed cases per 100,000 people in the world.

We have a relatively low proportion of serious cases and, according to the Oxford University Coronavirus Government Response Tracker, one of the lowest mortality rates in the world.

Nearly every case identified since April 1 is as a result of overseas travel or contact with someone with the virus, often in existing clusters. The number of individual cases that don't have an obvious connection in that period stands now at only 8.

Our testing has scaled up and we have now tested over 85,000 New Zealanders, one of the highest testing rates per capita in the world.

In the last few days, we expanded testing to include random testing in Queenstown, the Waikato, Canterbury and Auckland. We have tested over a thousand people this way and so far have produced not a single positive result.

The Director General of Health is confident that there is currently no widespread undetected community transmission in New Zealand.

In short, the effort of our team of 5 million has broken the chain of transmission and taken a quantum leap forward in our goal to eliminate the virus.

Elimination doesn't mean zero cases, it means zero tolerance for cases. It means when a case emerges, and it will, we test, we contact trace, we isolate, and we do that every single time with the ambition that when we see COVID-19, we eliminate it. That is how we will keep our transmission rate under 1, and it is how we will keep succeeding.

And we have seen success.

You, all of you, have stopped the uncontrolled explosion of COVID-19 in New Zealand, and I couldn't feel prouder of the start we have made together.

But I also feel a huge responsibility to ensure that we do not lose any of the gains we have made either.

On that basis, New Zealand will move out of Alert Level 4 lockdown at 11.59pm on Monday April 27, one week from today. We will then hold in Alert Level 3 for two weeks, before reviewing how we are tracking again, and making further decisions at Cabinet on the 11th of May.

In making this decision, Cabinet discussed in depth all of the data we have shared with you daily. We looked at the gains we have made in our results, but also our systems.

We considered that the longer we are in lockdown, the less likely it is we will need to go back. We also considered moving alert levels on the 23rd of April, in just 48 hours' time.

The sacrifice made to date has been huge. And Cabinet wanted to make sure we lock in our gains, and give ourselves some additional certainty.

Waiting to move to alert levels next week costs us two more business days, but gives us much greater longer term health and economic returns down the track. It means we are less likely to go backwards.

Ultimately, we have taken a balanced approach, and one that the Director General of Health not only supported, but also recommended.

This time we now have will be used to prepare, on all fronts.

This week businesses will be allowed to get ready to open, such as employers re-entering premises to receive stock if necessary, but we ask that in doing so they stick to social distancing and their bubbles.

The same principle applies for preparing schools.

Schools and early learning centres can be accessed this week for cleaning, maintenance and any other preparations. The current plan is for schools to be able to re-open for a Teacher Only Day on 28 April as part of their preparation, and we expect those who need to attend, to be able to from 29 April. It may take a bit longer for some schools and early learning centres to be ready.

And from a health perspective, testing will continue including giving ongoing public confidence that we are reaching isolated, rural, Māori and Pacific communities, contact tracing will be bolstered even further, and we will continue to use the best evidence, advice and modelling we have to make daily decisions to serve New Zealanders.

The most important thing to remember in the meantime though, is that all of this preparation takes us to an alert level in one week's time – a recovery room of sorts – that has many restrictions.

Yes Alert Level 3 allows more economic activity like construction, manufacturing and forestry, but it does not allow more social activity. And for good reason. If we want to make sure that we are a health success story, and ensure our economy can start to operate again without the virus taking off, we need to get the next phase right. The worst thing we can do for our country is to yo-yo between levels, with all of the uncertainty that this would bring.

We need to move with confidence. And that means following the rules.

So here's a reminder of the principles for Level 3 when we get there.

1. **Stay home.** If you are not at work, school, exercising or getting essentials, then you must be at home, the same as at Level 4.
2. **Work and learn from home if you can.** We still want the vast majority of people working from home, and children and young people learning from home. At-risk students and staff should also stay at home, and they will be supported to do so. Early learning centres and schools will physically be open for up to Year 10 for families that need them.
3. **Make your business COVID-19 safe.** COVID-19 has spread in workplaces, so the quid pro quo of being able to open is doing it in a way that doesn't spread the virus. Important industries like construction, manufacturing and forestry will be able to open, as will retail so long as it is contactless retail.
4. **Stay regional.** You can exercise at parks or beaches within your region, but the closer to home the better. Activities must be safe – keep 2 metres away from anybody not in your bubble. Make minimal trips.
5. **Keep your bubble as small as possible.** If you need to, you can expand your bubble a small amount to bring in close family, isolated people or caregivers. <
6. **Wash your hands often with soap.** Then dry them. Cough into your elbow.
7. **If you're sick stay at home** and seek advice from your GP or Healthline about getting a test. And quickly. There is no stigma to COVID-19. None. We will only be successful if everyone is willing to play their part in finding it wherever it is.

These rules will be so important. We all want to continue to progress down the levels. The best hope of getting back to normal as soon as possible, is never getting ahead of where we are right now.

So, to recap. We are currently in lockdown, and are staying there for the next week.

From Tuesday morning the 28th of April we will move to Level 3 and stay there for two weeks. Those two weeks gives us another cycle of transmission to assess how we are doing. From there, we will move if we can and if we're ready.

But only when we're ready, and only when it's safe.

And so, this weekend, ANZAC weekend, enjoy the company of your bubble, stay local, and reflect on the amazing sacrifice of our forebears.

Decades ago they came together in the most testing of circumstances half a world away and helped forge who we are today. It was a very different battle than the one we are in now, but the character of who we are as a country remains exactly the same.

So please, stay strong, stay home, be kind. And let's finish what we started.



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