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Covid-19 Omicron outbreak: New Zealand to move to phase 3 of response

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New Zealand will move to phase 3 of the Omicron response at 11.59pm, Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins has confirmed.

Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield and Hipkins are laying out what phase 3 includes.

Watch the announcement here:

While the ministry's daily update of case numbers will come out later this afternoon, he confirms today's cases are "about 5000".

"This continued rise and also the number of hospitalisations we have which today sit at 205 means that we are now confirming our shift to phase 3 of our planned Omicron response. That'll happen at 11.59pm tonight."

He says most have been gearing up for this and it will not come as a surprise.

However, the move to phase three will not mean a "sudden lurch" in terms of additional restrictions or movements, because the traffic light system has been designed to smooth things out already.

"Our priorities now shift to isolating those with Covid-19 and their household contacts to reduce the spread, while at the same time supporting supply chains and essential services to continue to operate."

Only confirmed cases and their household contacts - the people they live with - will be required to isolate. All other contacts will be asked to monitor for symptoms but they will not have to isolate.

Hipkins says it's important to note that the legal requirement to isolate for cases and household contacts does not mean people who do not fit in those groups should not isolate.

"If you have a friend who has Covid-19, you can make a judgement about whether you think you might be at risk ... we are asking New Zealanders to accept a much greater degree of personal responsibility."

Bloomfield says healthcare workforces who are essential and are household contacts are not allowed to go back to work for the first seven days but may return to work after that - three days early - if they return a negative RAT on days five and six and are asymptomatic.

Hipkins says detailed information will be sent to schools but the principle remains the same - if you are not a household contact you are not required to isolate.

He says he acknowledges some parents are in a better situation than others.

Bloomfield says people who don't respond to the text message will be followed up to confirm whether or not they need clinical or social support to isolate.

Rapid antigen tests (RATs) will become the primary means of testing for Covid-19, and will be available from thousands of sites. Millions more are expected to arrive over the coming days.

It is expected that businesses will be able to make the tests available to the public through retail outlets from March, he says.

Hipkins says RAT tests have been distributed throughout the health network.

"They're available to people who need them ... through the testing network."

"The last thing we want is people sitting on big stockpiles of them when there's more demand elsewhere."

Businesses have been able to import RATs since the beginning of December, but many "like ourselves, have had challenges in securing supplies because of global constraints", Bloomfield says.

He says clinics in Tāmaki Makaurau will begin rolling out supervised rapid antigen testing from today.

Locations where you can get a rapid antigen tests will be listed on the Healthpoint website (https://www.healthpoint.co.nz/).

He says there were 6.3 million unused tests in the country yesterday, another million arrived last night and another 10 million are expected to arrive in the coming week.

Hipkins says because only household contacts are required to isolate, a self-assessment tool will help the government keep track of very high risk locations and the overall spread of the virus.

This includes things like hospitals and aged care facilities.

Hospitalisations become a major focus and daily case numbers will be a less important metric from now, Hipkins says.

"There's no doubt the next few weeks are going to be pretty challenging... We just need to stick to the plan that we've set out as we manage a higher number of cases in our coming weeks before we reach a peak as other countries have."

Bloomfield says hospitalisation rates are about 85 percent at the moment, which is "about what they usually are", but an increase in cases will drive an increase.

That said, "if you are unwell for any reason, you can and should seek care in our health system and that includes in our hospitals."

Hipkins says Omicron's lower likelihood of severe illness, and high vaccination rates, are what allows the self-management approach.

He suggests people have an isolation plan, and talk to friends and whānau about how they will manage if they need to isolate.

He also urges people to take up booster shots.

"You are far less likely to end up in hospital if you get Covid-19 if you've had a booster."

He says modelling of the low-transmission scenario assumes high booster uptake. Bloomfield says two new studies confirm the vaccine protects against getting infected in the first place and protect against severe illness.

"One of the studies, which was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, shows that compared with being unvaccinated the odds of contracting Omicron after receiving three doses dropped by 67 percent - two thirds - and for Delta the risk declined by a stunning 93 percent."

"So a highly-boosted population here will serve us all well."

Bloomfield says one of the reasons for advising the move to phase 3 alongside the case numbers today, is it coincides with shifts already going on in Auckland and Northland to a focus on RAT testing, so PCR testing is reserved for people who are unwell or more susceptible, for example those in hospital.

To confirm - people who are symptomatic, and people who are asymptomatic who test positive on RAT tests, will be considered confirmed cases.

People should also advise their employer if they test positive, he says.

Both cases and household contacts will need to isolate for 10 days.

Bloomfield says while only household contacts will be required to isolate, cases should still notify people who are non-household contacts.

"And for example they may need to modify what they do, not visit older relatives or people who may be susceptible if there's a risk they were a contact."

He says people should be really mindful about who they visit in the coming weeks.

"As we did earlier in the pandemic, act as if you have Covid, and look to protect others around you, remembering that over a third of people if you are infected with Omicron will not have any symptoms."

Bloomfield says household contacts who return negative tests during isolation will be released after 10 days, even if another member of the household subsequently tests positive. Household contacts will need two negative tests.

Hipkins says people who need to get a test will still have those tests freely available, and where people are concerned and want to get a test they will soon have the opportunity to purchase them.

Bloomfield says New Zealand's test positivity rate is still only about 11 percent, which although it's much higher than it has been, is still very low compared to other countries. New South Wales is still sitting about 30 percent, he says.

That said, there will likely be many cases who never get tested. "We can expect that there will be a significant number of cases we will never find because they don't have any symptoms and won't seek testing in the first place."

Hipkins says New Zealanders have throughout the pandemic mostly done the right thing, and he expects that will continue.

"Again, we're placing more trust in New Zealanders to do the right thing."

Hipkins says providers are being resourced to provide wraparound health and care services in the community, alongside clinical care to those with higher needs.

"New Zealand is in a much better shape going into a potential peak of Omicron cases than many other countries, so keep supporting one another and we will get through this."

Hipkins says he is expecting advice in the next week or two about whether incoming vaccinated travellers will still be required to self-isolate upon arrival.

The Ministry of Health is still maintaining an eight-week gap between paediatric doses based on overseas evidence.

Hipkins says the government is working on approving the Novavax vaccine. It's not there yet, he says, and at this stage it would only be approved for a primary course - not boosters.

The government initially set out the three phases of its Omicron response (https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/460249/covid-19-next-phases-of-government-s-omicron-plan-revealed) late last month, signalling an increasing reliance on automated systems and home isolation as growing case numbers threaten to overwhelm contact tracing, testing, and MIQ.

It was initially suggested New Zealand may never reach phase three (https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/what-you-need-to-know/462173/omicron-phase-three-what-you-need-to-know), expected to trigger when the country was getting about 5000 cases a day, but that now seems inevitable with case numbers topping 3000 yesterday.

Meanwhile, the [https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/462158/covid-19-omicron-outbreak-parliament-protest-occupation-in-17th-day protest at Parliament has been labelled a location of interest and Bloomfield says the expectations of those who are there is the same as would be expected of anyone else.

"That is to essentially do the right thing to protect other people, and that's the reason we've done well to date is because New Zealanders have done that, actually. Regardless of what the rules are it's still relied on a high level of trust and confidence that people will do the right thing and they have."

Asked about his concerns about those at the protest, he says we know exactly the kinds of things that are likely to spread the virus, which includes singing and shouting. "And some of those people, especially because we know there are lower vaccination rates, will get unwell. And particularly unwell. And that to me puts them at risk and so I'm concerned about that."

He says he has seen reports that people who were at the protest who have turned up to hospital who have tested positive for Covid-19, but he's not sure if they turned up at hospital because of the virus or some other reason.