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New measures to tackle COVID-19 and flu

HON DR AYESHA VERRALL(/MINISTER/HON-DR-AYESHA-VERRALL)

COVID-19 Response (/portfolio/labour-2020-2023/covid-19-response)

- Expanded eligibility for antivirals
- Making COVID-19 medicines available in pharmacies to help ease pressure on GPs
- Significantly expanding access to free RATs and masks
- Schools provided with mask supplies and more support for ventilation and winter heating costs
- Second COVID-19 booster available to those over 50
- Extra measures for a short time to get through the winter months.

The Government is rolling out additional measures to help tackle the second Omicron wave and record levels of flu to ease pressure on the health system and health workers.

“There’s no question the combination of a spike in COVID-19 cases and hospitalisations, the worst flu season in recent memory and corresponding staff absences are putting health workers and the whole health system under extreme pressure,” Minister for COVID-19 Response Dr Ayesha Verrall said.

“Our modelling suggests we’re at the beginning of a second Omicron wave that could be bigger than the first, with the more transmissible BA.5 variant becoming the dominant strain in the community.

“There has been a significant increase in cases over the past two weeks, and worryingly the biggest jump is in cases amongst New Zealanders aged 65 and over. That in turn has led to an increase in hospital occupancy.

“We are continuing to ask New Zealanders to do three things - get vaccinated, wear a mask in many or most indoor settings and isolate when sick to suppress the spread of the virus over the remaining winter months. If we all play our part we can take some pressure off the health system.

“To support this we are implementing a range of measures to help Kiwis stay well. These extra measures will help get us and the health system through the winter months. Please do your bit.

Medicines

“We are increasing access to antiviral medication to those most likely to end up in hospital, making free masks and RATs more widely available and doing another push to lift uptake of flu and COVID-19 vaccines including the second booster.

"Antiviral medications can reduce the seriousness of COVID-19 meaning fewer people need to be hospitalised, so we are making these more widely available as pharmacist only medications.

"Pharmac are also broadening the eligibility criteria to enable more people from higher risk groups to access antiviral medications. Pharmac will be making further announcements about this today.

"These eligible groups will be able to access antivirals without the need for a doctor's prescription. This means access will expand from 2 per cent to 10 per cent of cases.

"From Monday 18 July anyone over 75 years of age who has tested positive for COVID-19 or anyone who has been admitted previously to an Intensive Care Unit directly as a result of COVID-19, will be eligible to access antivirals through their GP.

"This will help alleviate pressure on primary care by removing the need for GPs to review every COVID-19 patient that may be eligible for antivirals.

"To speed up access to antivirals, GPs can now provide back pocket prescriptions which means at-risk patients for acute respiratory illnesses can be preapproved and have their prescription ready should they become unwell and need the medicine immediately.

RATs and masks

"To increase uptake in use in RATs and masks packs of medical masks will be provided free along with free RAT kits for individuals and households from testing centres and in more locations by the end of the week. You do not need to have COVID-19 symptoms. And P2/N95 masks will be available for clinically vulnerable and high risk individuals.

"Free RATs will be available from all current community providers, including marae, testing stations and local pharmacies.

"We are encouraging everyone who needs extra RATs or masks to head to a testing site or other location and collect a free pack for you and your whānau. There is no criteria, you don't need to be unwell or have symptoms.

"Wearing masks can reduce new cases of the virus by as much as 53 per cent. We are asking New Zealanders to keep up good mask wearing, especially over the remaining winter months where the virus is more likely to pass in indoor settings.

"The tried and tested measures: wearing a high quality mask, strong vaccine and booster uptake, antivirals and testing are highly effective and will put us in the best position to get through what is one of the toughest winters we've faced.

"We are also providing 10 million child-size masks available for year 4-7 students in New Zealand and up to 30,000 masks a week for all other students and school staff, alongside extra funding to support better ventilation over winter.

"These are the most effective measures we have. They are simple but if we all do them we can lessen illness and the burden on our health system and dedicated health workers, and get through this darkest part of winter," Dr Verrall said.

Notes to editors:

Over the past 2 months:

- 10.4 million RATs have been distributed.
- 16 million medical procedure masks (7.9 million of these have been distributed through community providers)
- Over 3 million N95s (over 167,000 of these via community groups to high risk or vulnerable people).

The Ministry of Health currently have on hand 46.6 million RATs, 41 million medical procedure masks, and 5.1 million N95s for community use, with good supply chains in place to meet increased demand as people protect themselves and others this winter.

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