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Covid 19 coronavirus: Government announces new Covid testing rule

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'Over the past few days, we have seen some of the highest numbers of deaths recorded at any point in the pandemic' - WHO warns against complacency as vaccine roll-outs begin. Video / AP

By: **Jason Walls**

Jason Walls is a political reporter for the New Zealand Herald

jason.walls@nzme.co.nz

@Jasonwalls92

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Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield now has the power to require travellers from every country in the world to produce a negative Covid-19 test before they leave for New Zealand.

And he is expected to use that power soon, according to Covid-19 Minister Chris Hipkins.

As well as this, most travellers will now be required to take a Covid-19 test as soon as they enter New Zealand.

This afternoon, the Government unveiled a number of new border protection changes which it said would protect New Zealand from Covid-19, including any new more contagious strains.

"Given the high rates of infection in many countries and evidence of the global spread of more transmissible variants, it's clear that most global air routes will be of critical concern for the foreseeable future, and we must respond strongly to the evolving situation," Hipkins said.

At the moment, only people coming from the UK and the US are required to produce a negative test – but Bloomfield is set to expand that to every country in the world.

The only exceptions are travellers from Australia, Antarctica and some Pacific Island nations.

Hipkins has also expanded New Zealand's domestic quarantine and isolation testing requirements.

From January 18, travellers from anywhere in the world will be required to undergo day 0/1 testing when entering the country, as well as the routine day 3 and 12 tests.

People travelling from Australia, Antarctica and some Pacific Island nations are also exempt from these rules.

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"New Zealand already has some of the most stringent border protection measures in the world," Hipkins said.

"Today's amendments further strengthen that position in line with the Government's overall elimination strategy."

Hipkins said New Zealand is in the fortunate position of having no community cases of any new variant types – "but we take nothing for granted".

"That's why we continue to take action, with very specific steps to further strengthen our response at the air border."

Meanwhile, Hipkins announced a number of other amended Air Border Order he has today signed.

• Children under two will be exempt from pre-departure testing

• Passengers transiting through the UK and US for not more than 96 hours before departing for New Zealand will be exempt for now from pre-departure testing

• RT-PCR tests, LAMP and viral antigen tests will all be accepted for pre-departure testing

• All tests must be processed at a laboratory

• A hard copy or electronic copy of the test result from an accredited laboratory will be acceptable documentation of a negative test

• Upon arrival in New Zealand travellers will be required to produce proof of their negative test result to a Customs officer during passport processing. Either a hard copy or an electronic copy will be accepted

In rare cases, Hipkins said the requirement of a test 72 hours in advance may be extended to 96 hours if a person's flight has been delayed or cancelled, or test results haven't been received in time.

In this situation, however, the flight must be rescheduled or rebooked to depart within 24 hours.

But he reiterated that all travellers, including anyone exempted from the pre-departure testing requirement, will still be required to complete the 14 days mandatory isolation which applies to all new arrivals into New Zealand.

From January 29, arriving in New Zealand without evidence of a negative approved test or medical certificate would incur an infringement offence fee or a fine not exceeding $1000.

Collins calls for more testing

This morning, National leader Judith Collins called for a blanket extension of all pre-departure testing rules.

But it is understood the Government has been working on this policy for some weeks.

"The threat to New Zealand from the highly infectious strains of Covid-19 which are ravaging the UK and South Africa must be taken seriously," Collins said this morning.

Given the increased risk of the new strain – which has already been detected in New Zealand's managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities – Collins said it's time for action now.

"If New Zealand doesn't act fast then we will be looking at a complete border closure with the UK or another economy-crippling lockdown here.

"Pre-departure testing is a crucial extra layer of defence against Covid-19 but the Government's piecemeal approach of only applying it two countries doesn't make sense."

Covid-19, she said, isn't slowing its march.

"If we want to enjoy the rest of our Kiwi summer then the Government must make pre-departure tests a requirement for all travellers immediately."

Yesterday, Collins was urging the Government to accelerate its rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination, given the increased risk of the new variant which is devastating the UK and South Africa.

National wants front-line workers, such as those working in managed isolation and quarantine facilities (MIQ), to get the vaccine as soon as possible.

"New Zealand has fallen behind the rest of the world with its vaccine programme and the Government needs to explain why."