

# History of the COVID-19 Protection Framework (traffic lights)

The COVID-19 Protection Framework ran from December 2021 to September 2022. It set out rules for different traffic light settings to manage life with Omicron.

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## About the traffic lights

The COVID-19 Protection Framework replaced Alert Levels in December 2021 and ended in mid-September 2022. It had 3 traffic light settings of Red, Orange and Green.

The framework aimed to:

- help people protect one another from the virus
- keep hospitalisation rates as low as possible and avoid overwhelming the health system
- minimise the impact of large outbreaks
- reduce the need for lockdowns.

It also aimed to give people and businesses more stability.

At all traffic light settings, essential services continued to operate. This included supermarkets, health services, emergency services, goods transport, and utilities such as power and water supplies.

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### Life at Red

At the Red traffic light setting, we need to take action to protect our vulnerable communities and our health system from COVID-19.

- You can always access basic needs, such as food and healthcare, without showing proof of vaccination.
  - You can travel anywhere in New Zealand, and visit friends and whānau.
  - You must wear a face mask in most indoor locations.
  - You do not need to wear a face mask outdoors.
  - You can go to cafes and bars, attend gatherings and events, and go to gyms and hairdressers. Some venues have capacity limits and distancing requirements.
  - Workplaces and schools can open.
  - Keep physically distanced wherever possible.
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### Life at Orange

At the Orange traffic light setting, COVID-19 is in the community, with risks to vulnerable people and pressure on the health system.

- You must wear a face mask in many indoor locations.
- You can visit cafes and bars, attend gatherings and events, and go to gyms and hairdressers — with no capacity limits or distancing requirements.

- Workplaces and schools can open.
  - Keep up healthy habits to protect yourself, your whānau and others.
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## Life at Green

At the Green traffic light setting, there is limited community transmission, and our health system is ready to respond.

- No restrictions.
  - Keep up healthy habits to protect yourself, your whānau and others. Examples include handwashing and staying home when sick.
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# Components of the framework

## Vaccination

A high vaccination rate remains a key tool to protect people and minimise the spread of COVID-19. Getting vaccinated means you are less likely to get extremely sick or infect other people.

Some workplaces may require staff to be vaccinated. Vaccine mandates for government workers ended during 2022.

## Face masks

Wearing face masks remains a way to protect ourselves and others. At Red and Orange traffic light settings, there were some places people had to wear face masks, such as on public transport and in supermarkets.

## Capacity limits

At Red, capacity limits applied in some indoor settings. Limits were based on 1-metre distancing, which meant 1 metre square of space for each person, up to the maximum capacity limit. It did not mean everyone had to stay 1 metre apart.

Capacity limits did not include workers (paid and unpaid).

## Local protections and lockdowns

If an area had very high infection rates, extra restrictions such as local lockdowns or other protective steps may have been used.

Examples of protective steps included:

- stay at home orders
- closing premises, such as schools or shops
- limiting numbers allowed at gatherings.

[COVID-19 Protection Framework traffic lights table \[PDF, 57 KB\]](#)

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# Timeline of important events

## 2 December 2021

The COVID-19 Alert Level System ends.

[History of the Alert System](#)

At 11:59pm New Zealand moves to the COVID-19 Protection Framework, or traffic light system.

Northland, Auckland, Taupo, Rotorua Lakes, Kawerau, Whakatane, Ōpōtiki, Gisborne, Wairoa, Rangitikei, Whanganui, and Ruapehu districts move to Red.

The rest of the North Island, and the South Island, move to Orange.

[Watch 1 December media conference](#)

## 14 December 2021

Auckland boundary lifts at 11:59pm. People travelling out of Auckland need to be vaccinated or have proof of a negative test.

## 16 December 2021

First confirmed Omicron border case.

The international traveller tests positive soon after arriving on 10 December. Genome sequencing then detects Omicron.

[Watch 16 December media conference](#)

## 30 December 2021

Auckland, Taupo, Rotorua Lakes, Kawerau, Whakatane, Ōpōtiki, Gisborne, Wairoa, Rangitikei, Whanganui, and Ruapehu districts move to Orange at 11:59pm.

Northland remains at Red.

## 17 January 2022

Auckland boundary-crossing rules end. People travelling out of Auckland no longer need proof of vaccination or a negative test.

## 20 January 2022

Northland moves to Orange at 11:59pm.

## 23 January 2022

First confirmed Omicron community cases.

All New Zealand moves to Red at 11:59pm.

[Watch 23 January media conference](#)

## 26 January 2022

The Government introduces Omicron phases, with different approaches to testing and isolation as case numbers grow.

- Phase 1: Focus on stamping out small outbreaks, with PCR testing and 14-day isolation period for COVID-19 cases.

- Phase 2: Focus on slowing the spread and protecting those most at risk of getting seriously ill. Contact tracing switches to online self-assessments, isolation period drops to 10 days.
- Phase 3: Focus on safely managing COVID-19 at home, with self-testing kits of rapid antigen tests (RATs) and isolation only for people who test positive and their Household Contacts.

[Government announces 3-phase public health response to Omicron](#)

## 3 February 2022

Face mask rules change for Red at 11:59pm.

[Increased mask use to prepare for Omicron](#)

## 10 February 2022

Close Contact exemption scheme begins for workers in key sectors.

## 16 February 2022

All New Zealand moves to Phase 2 of the Omicron response at 11:59pm.

[Watch 16 February media conference](#)

## 24 February 2022

All New Zealand moves to Phase 3 of the Omicron response at 11:59pm.

[Watch 24 February media conference](#)

## 11 March 2022

Isolation period drops from 10 to 7 days at 11:59pm.

## 25 March 2022

Changes to traffic light settings at 11:59pm include:

- Indoor gathering limits at Red increase from 100 to 200 people.
- No more limits on numbers at outdoor gatherings in any traffic light setting.
- Contact tracing and record-keeping requirements end for businesses and other organisations.

## 4 April 2022

Vaccine passes are no longer needed in any traffic setting from 11:59pm.

Most vaccine mandates end for government workers.

All New Zealand remains at Red.

[Watch 4 April media conference](#)

## 13 April 2022

All New Zealand moves to Orange at 11:59pm.

[Watch 13 April media conference](#)

## 2 July 2022

Vaccine mandates end for border and corrections workers.

## 7 July 2022

Vaccine mandates end for some workers in the Defence Force, Fire and Emergency, and Police.

## 12 September 2022

The COVID-19 Protection Framework (traffic lights) ends at 11:59pm.

## 26 September 2022

The last government vaccine mandates — for health and disability workers — ends at 11:59pm.