

2021

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**Chief Health Officer Report on the Status of the Public Health Emergency due to COVID-19
Report 11 – 15 February 2021**

**Presented by
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Minister for Health
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CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 15 FEBRUARY 2021

Declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT

A public health emergency declaration is in force in the ACT due to the public health risk of COVID-19 to the ACT community. As Chief Health Officer, I make a recommendation to the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration be extended for a further 90 days, until 18 May 2021, due to the ongoing public health risk COVID-19 presents.

The public health emergency declaration enables me, as Chief Health Officer, to take necessary actions to reduce threats to public health, including issuing public health directions that aim to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our community. These directions include the requirement for returned travellers to undertake hotel quarantine and for confirmed cases of COVID-19 and their close contacts to self-isolate.

The ACT's public health response is guided by the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and National Cabinet.

National situational update¹

As at 14 February 2021, there have been a total of 28,898 cases of COVID-19 in Australia and 909 deaths. The majority of cases reported nationally in the past fortnight were overseas acquired and diagnosed in hotel quarantine. In the last seven days there have been 32 overseas acquired cases of COVID-19 and 14 locally acquired cases. There are currently an estimated 41 active cases in Australia. Of the locally acquired cases, the majority have been from Victoria.

The overall proportion of cases under investigation in each state and territory is relatively low, indicating that public health actions, including case identification and contact tracing, is occurring in a timely and effective manner.

To date, more than 13,638,907 tests have been conducted nationally. Of those tests conducted, 0.2% have been positive.

NSW situation

In NSW, there have been zero locally acquired cases reported over the past 14 days. A new case was reported on 8 February 2021 in an overseas returned traveller who was released from hotel quarantine after 14 days and then tested positive for COVID-19 on day 16. This person had previously tested negative twice during their quarantine stay and it is believed that it was an historical case and the individual was not infectious after leaving quarantine. On 29 January 2021, the ACT removed all NSW LGAs from the listed COVID-19 affected areas based on an assessment of the improved situation across the state.

Western Australia situation

In Western Australia, a new case of COVID-19 was notified in a hotel quarantine worker on 1 February 2021 and the Perth metropolitan area, the Peel and South West regions of Western Australia subsequently entered a five-day lockdown from 31 January 2021 to 5 February 2021.

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers#at-a-glance> Coronavirus (COVID-19) at a glance – 12 February 2021, Australian Government Department of Health, accessed 12 February 2021

In response to the threat associated with this new case, the ACT implemented a new Public Health Direction on 1 February 2021 requiring anyone who had been in the COVID-19 affected areas of the Perth metropolitan area, the Peel and South West regions since 25 January 2021 to get tested and quarantine until at least 9pm (ACT time) on 5 February 2021. The Direction required ACT residents returning from Western Australia to quarantine, get tested and complete an online declaration form. Non-ACT residents who were already within the ACT and had been to one of the COVID Affected areas were also required to quarantine, get tested and complete an online declaration form. For non-ACT residents who had not yet travelled to the ACT, an approved exemption to enter the ACT was required prior to travelling. Of the 221 exemption applications received, 84 were approved.

The Perth metropolitan area, the Peel and South West regions were removed as COVID-19 affected areas at 6pm (ACT time) on 5 February 2021 as no new locally acquired cases were recorded by Western Australia during the five-day lockdown period. A total of 400 people were released from quarantine.

Victoria situation

In Victoria, several new cases of COVID-19 have recently been recorded in hotel quarantine settings. On 3 February 2021, a new case was identified in a worker at the Grand Hyatt hotel who was tested at the end of their shift on 29 January 2021 and returned a negative result. Following that test, the worker developed symptoms and was tested again on 2 February 2021 and returned a positive result. Once this case was publicly notified, the ACT moved quickly to put in place a Public Health Direction listing exposure sites identified by the Victorian Government as COVID-19 affected areas. This direction requires any person who has been present at a listed exposure site to get tested, self-isolate, and remain in isolation for 14 days.

As at 14 February 2021, a total of 16 cases have been associated with a second cluster at the Holiday Inn Melbourne. A new case was identified in a Holiday Inn hotel quarantine worker on 7 February 2021 after the worker developed symptoms upon their return to work and was subsequently tested. Two additional cases were identified on 9 February 2021, one a returned overseas traveller who had completed their 14 day hotel quarantine at the Holiday Inn hotel and then tested positive for COVID-19 after a test on Day 16, and the other a worker at the hotel who received a test after they had developed symptoms on 6 February 2021 and were identified as a primary close contact of a case at the hotel.

Following an increase of cases in Melbourne, the Victorian Government announced a state-wide five-day lockdown to commence from 11:59pm 12 February 2021 to assist health authorities with contact tracing and to slow the spread of the virus. The ACT's Public Health Direction was updated to list the State of Victoria as a COVID-19 affected area and impose quarantine requirements on any individuals wishing to travel to the ACT after the lockdown period had commenced. Similar restrictions that were put in place for Western Australia currently apply to Victorian travellers. That is, if ACT residents must return to the ACT, they are required to complete an online declaration form, and enter quarantine until at least 11.59pm on 17 February. Non-ACT residents seeking to enter the ACT must apply for an exemption prior to travel with each application to be reviewed by ACT Health. To date, 37 exemptions have been granted. ACT Health is closely monitoring the situation in Victoria and will update the Public Health Direction as required.

ACT situational update

There have been no recent cases reported in the ACT, bringing the total number of days since the last notified case to 57 days. There are currently no active cases in the ACT and there is no evidence of community transmission at this time. A total of 115 cases have recovered, and sadly there were three deaths early in the pandemic.

The number of tests undertaken in the past 14 days is similar than in the previous 14 days, with the testing rate remaining below 1 test per 1,000 population. Since a spike in testing rates in January 2021, testing rates have decreased in the older age groups (18 - 45 years and older than 45 years) and plateaued in the youngest group (less than 18 years). These changes appear to be independent of sex.

There are currently travel restrictions and self-quarantine requirements in place for Victoria.

As at 15 February 2021, there are 473 persons in quarantine in the ACT including 173 people associated with a Government Facilitated Flight that landed on 8 February 2021.

On Monday 8 February 2021, the ACT received a Government Facilitated Flight from Chennai, India with 166 passengers on board. All passengers underwent health screening upon arrival at Canberra Airport and were safely moved into hotel quarantine by ACT Health, with support from ACT Policing and the Australian Defence Force. In addition, seven individuals received an exemption to enter quarantine to support returning family members. None of the travellers associated with the flight returned a positive sample in their entry testing and all persons in quarantine will be tested again on day 10-12, and if they develop COVID-19 symptoms at any time during their quarantine.

The ACT has now received four Government Facilitated Flights since international border restrictions commenced in 2020, repatriating a total of 790 Australian citizens and permanent residents seeking to return home. The ACT also manages the frequent return of diplomats and government officials travelling to Canberra for official duties.

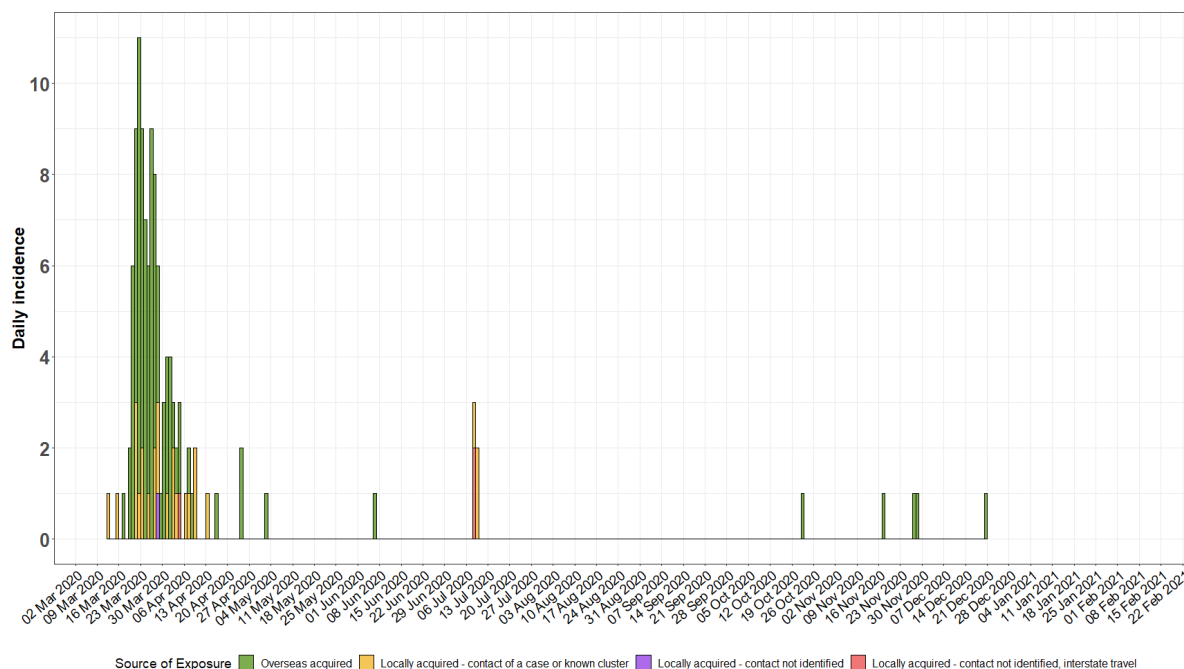
ACT Health has implemented the Safeguarding Canberrans (SCAN) Surveillance Program as part of a national approach to screening workers involved in the repatriation of Australians from overseas. All government and hotel staff involved in supporting Government Facilitated Flights are registered in SCAN and now receive daily saliva tests, a weekly deep nasal and throat swab as well as daily syndromic surveillance and detailed public health advice. To date, none of the individuals registered in the SCAN program have tested positive for COVID-19.

To date, ACT Policing has issued six criminal infringements (fines to three businesses and three individuals), 15 cautions, and made one arrest for breaches of COVID-19 Public Health Directions. The rate of compliance across the ACT has been high throughout the pandemic, and the Canberra community has been receptive to COVID-19 restrictions and directions. ACT Policing will continue to conduct COVID-19 compliance activities including checking of individuals subject to current directions such as mandatory quarantine.

As at 4 February 2021, 6,050 venues in the ACT are registered with the Check In CBR app and there have been nearly 315,000 downloads of the app since its launch. The use of this app by patrons attending businesses and venues in the ACT provides additional assurance to ACT Health and the local community that contact tracing teams can respond quickly and effectively if a new locally acquired case is identified. The Check In CBR app has recently been improved to provide an add-on venue function which allows businesses to register patrons who are unable to do so themselves.

Health Protection Services, Access Canberra and ACT Policing will continue to undertake compliance and enforcement activity to help protect the community as the pandemic response continues.

Confirmed ACT COVID-19 cases by date of notification



Global situational update

Globally, as of 14 February 2021, there have been more than 108,000,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than 2,380,000 deaths, reported to the World Health Organization. Most of the new cases over the past 14 days have been reported in the Americas (50%), followed by the European Region (35%). By country, the United States of America, Brazil and the United Kingdom reported the most cases over the past 14 days.

The New Zealand travel bubble was suspended for 72 hours on 25 January 2021 after a New Zealand woman who had recently completed hotel quarantine tested positive with the SARS-CoV-2 Variant of Concern (VoC) first identified in South Africa. This suspension was extended for another 72 hours. At the completion of the additional 72 hours the bubble was reopened. On 14 February 2021, AHPPC again recommended to suspend the New Zealand ‘Green Zone’ for 72 hours to gather information about New Zealand’s most recent outbreak. Australian jurisdictions are contacting persons who arrived from New Zealand between 6 and 14 February 2021 to determine if they have been in affected locations.

The ACT community’s response

The efforts of the ACT community, including businesses, have been vital in slowing the spread of COVID-19. The continuation of these efforts, including following the public health advice and public health directions, is critical to control the spread of COVID-19 in the ACT. Businesses are asked to follow their COVID Safety Plans to support the safety of the community and their staff. All members of the community are also being reminded to:

- maintain physical distancing wherever possible
- practice good hand and respiratory hygiene
- stay home if unwell, and
- get tested if experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms.

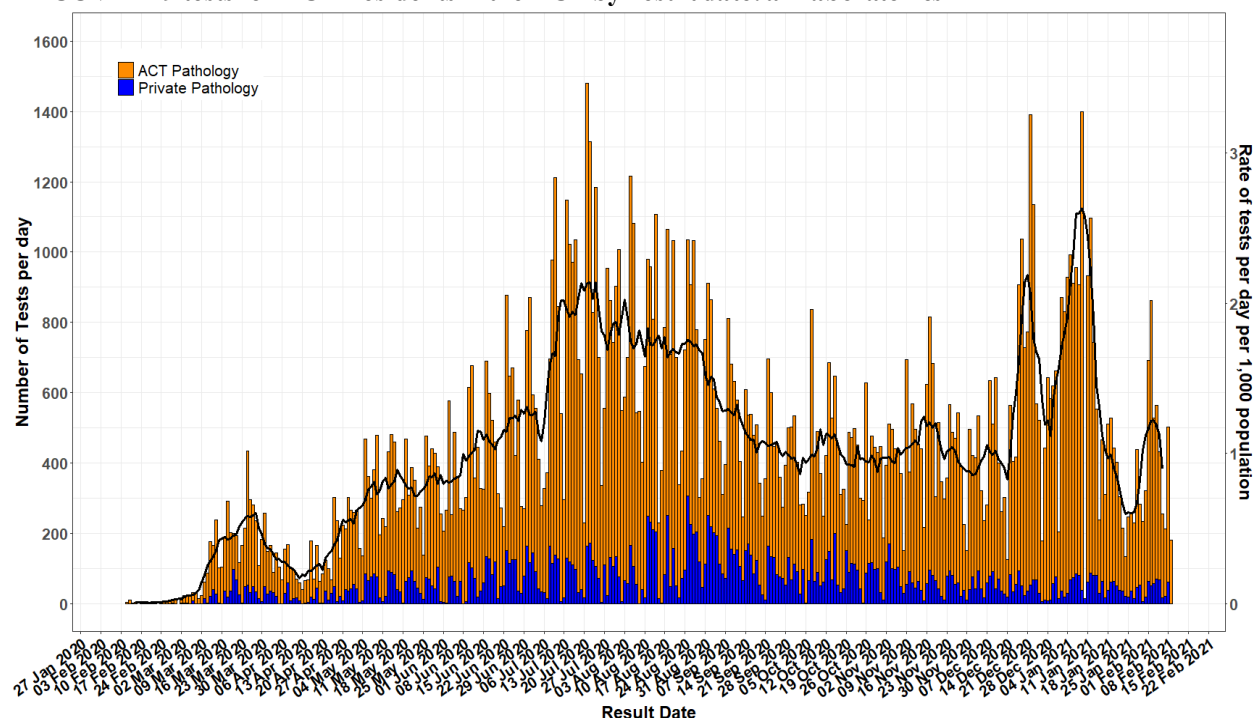
Compliance inspections continue to find good compliance overall with current public health directions, noting some issues among some businesses, namely keeping COVID Safety Plans up-to-date and maintaining current occupancy limits.

Surveillance and monitoring

Of the total number of tests conducted in the past month, there have been no confirmed cases and there is no new evidence of community transmission which is testament to Canberrans doing the right thing and following public health advice including notifying ACT Health before returning from a COVID affected area, and quarantining and getting tested if required. Testing numbers in the ACT continue to remain strong with a total of 163,769 negative tests conducted as of 15 February 2021.

It remains essential that Canberrans present for testing if experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms, no matter how mild. Continued high rates of testing are essential to maintain rigorous surveillance, closely monitor the situation and act quickly if a case is detected or new cases emerge in other jurisdictions.

All COVID-19 tests for ACT Residents in the ACT by result date: all laboratories



Wastewater testing

To strengthen our surveillance, the ACT has joined the NSW Health Wastewater COVID Surveillance Programme. For several months, a wastewater sample has been collected weekly from the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Plant, which receives wastewater from over 99 per cent of the ACT population. Since the start of December 2020, the sampling strategy has been strengthened to additionally include sampling from 5 sites across the ACT, with catchment areas ranging from approximately 40,000 people to approximately 100,000 people.

On 30 January 2021 it was confirmed that wastewater samples collected on 27 January 2021 detected traces of COVID-19 in the Belconnen area of the ACT. In response to this detection, ACT Health released public health advice to encourage anyone who lived, worked, or had recently visited the Belconnen area to monitor for symptoms and get tested even if they developed the mildest of symptoms. A second wastewater sample was collected and returned a negative result on 4 February 2021. None of the other sites have detected any trace of

COVID-19. It is believed that it may have been the result of someone in quarantine shedding the virus and was not an active case.

ACT Health will continue to monitor wastewater samples to support the ACT's COVID-19 response and inform future public health directions.

Vaccination program

On 7 January 2021, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination program would commence in February 2021. The rollout of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines will be guided by the Australian COVID-19 Vaccination Policy which sets out the roles and responsibilities of the Australian Government and State and Territory Governments. The Australian Government is working with States and Territories on the development of implementation plans, and consulting with medical and technical experts and peak bodies.

The ACT's priority is to deliver a safe, efficient, and targeted vaccination program for Canberrans and we are working with the Commonwealth to ensure Canberrans are well informed about the vaccination program, including those people in priority population groups. Priority population groups for phase 1a include workers involved in hotel quarantine for returning travellers and those health care workers who are at the highest risk of coming into contact with COVID-19. The ACT will be ready to commence vaccinating once the first shipment of the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine arrives, with the rollout scheduled to begin in late-February.

Easing of restrictions

The ACT is considering further easing of restrictions following a public health checkpoint. It is envisaged that an announcement will be made after the conclusion of the Victorian five day lockdown at 11:59pm on 17 February 2021.

Summary of Emergency Declarations across the jurisdictions

State	Extension Period	Relevant Legislation	Status
NSW	N/A	<i>Public Health Act 2010</i>	To deal with the public health risk of COVID-19 and its possible consequences, the NSW Minister for Health makes Orders under section 7 of the Public Health Act 2010 to 'take such action and give such direction' as considered necessary to deal with a public health risk and its possible consequences.
Vic	28 days	<i>Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008</i>	Extended the current Declaration of State of Emergency on 29 January 2021 to 11.59pm on 26 February 2021 . Instrument signed by Acting Minister for Health, Lisa Neville MP.
Qld	90 days	<i>Public Health Act 2010</i>	Extended declared public health emergency for COVID-19 on 17 December 2020 to 11:59pm on 31 March 2021 . The <i>Public Health (Further Extension of Declared Public Health Emergency–COVID-19) Regulation (No. 6) 2020</i> was made by Queensland's Governor in Council, and extends all active Public Health Directions issued by the state's Chief Health Officer, Dr Jeannette Young.
WA	14 days	<i>Emergency Management Act</i>	Extended the State of Emergency declaration under section 58 of the <i>Emergency Management Act 2005</i> from 4 February 2021 until 12am on 18 February 2021 . Signed by Minister for Emergency Services, Francis Logan.
SA	28 days	<i>Emergency Management Act 2004</i>	Extended declaration of major emergency under section 23 of <i>Emergency Management Act 2004</i> from 6 February 2021 until 6 March 2021 . Signed by the Governor of South Australia on 6 February 2021.
Tas	12 weeks	<i>Public Health Act 1997</i>	Extended emergency declaration under section 15(2) of the <i>Public Health Act 1997</i> until 12 February 2021 .
NT	90 days	<i>Public and Environmental Health Act 2011</i>	Extended public health emergency declaration on 8 December 2020 under the <i>Public and Environmental Health Act 2011</i> until 23 March 2021 .
Aust Govt	3 months	<i>Biosecurity Act 2015</i>	Extended human biosecurity emergency by an additional three months under section 475 of the <i>Biosecurity Act 2015</i> (Cth) until 17 March 2021 .

Conclusion

Recent outbreaks and clusters in other jurisdictions demonstrate the unpredictability of the pandemic. While the ACT and most parts of Australia continue to do well in managing the pandemic compared to many other parts of the world, more transmissible variants of concern pose increased risks to the community. The ACT is working closely with the Commonwealth Government and all jurisdictions to ensure our quarantine system is robust and that we have appropriate infection prevention control measures including the SCAN program to reduce the risk of introduction of these strains of the disease into the community.

The Australian Government COVID-19 vaccine rollout is still on track to commence in February 2021 and the ACT is well placed to commence the vaccination program in Canberra. ACT Health is working closely with the Commonwealth Department of Health to guide the implementation of our vaccine program. The aim is to deliver a safe, efficient and targeted vaccination program for Canberrans, and keep the community well informed about the program.

The situation across the world is a reminder that the pandemic is far from over and the risk of new cases emerging remains high until effective vaccine has been widely rolled out. AHPPC advises that Australia will continue to see cases and periodic outbreaks. The ACT is focusing on maintaining robust risk mitigation measures, continuing enhanced surveillance in the community and outbreak planning for at-risk settings.

The ACT's focus is early detection of cases; preparedness to thoroughly investigate cases, clusters and outbreaks and ensure our workforce is equipped to surge when required; and public messaging to community and businesses around the importance of continuing to practise COVID safe behaviours. While restrictions may be eased slightly across the ACT in the coming weeks it is vital that the community continues to follow the health advice and public health directions to control the spread of COVID-19 in the ACT.

Recommendation

As Chief Health Officer, I advise the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration should be extended for a further 90 days until 18 May 2021 due to the public health risk posed by COVID-19. At this time, it remains necessary to maintain public health control measures to safeguard against a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the ACT. All Australian jurisdictions are maintaining public health emergency status or similar at this time and continuing to focus on suppression of COVID-19.