

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 17 NOVEMBER 2020

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 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 to self-isolate.

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

National situational update

As at 17 November 2020, there have been a total of 27,750 cases of COVID-19 in Australia and 907 deaths. The majority of cases reported nationally in the past fortnight were overseas acquired and diagnosed in hotel quarantine in New South Wales and Queensland. A cluster of COVID-19 cases is currently evolving in South Australia.

There are currently 20 active cases in NSW. The number of locally acquired cases over the past fortnight was 9, with 1 being from an unknown source. In the last week there have been 28 overseas acquired notifications in hotel quarantine. Testing in NSW has continued to decline since a recent peak in late August, however, this is beginning to plateau. Similar trends in testing are reported in other jurisdictions. On 4 November 2020, the Premier of NSW announced that from 23 November 2020, NSW Government will reopen its border with Victoria.

The COVID-19 situation in Victoria has dramatically improved. The most recent locally acquired case was reported on 29 October 2020, and there are now only 3 active cases in Victoria. Victoria will move to the last step in their Roadmap for Reopening when there are no new cases in the state for 14 days, anticipated for 22 November. Progress to COVID Normal is planned for when there are no new cases for 28 days, no active cases in Victoria and no outbreaks of concern in other states or territories.

As of 13 November 2020, in the ACT and other jurisdictions where there are zero or small numbers of active cases, average state-wide transmission potential is estimated to be above 1, indicating that conditions are suitable to sustain onward transmission if there were an undetected importation event. The state-wide transmission potential in NSW is also above 1, which suggests that current levels of distancing behaviour are not necessarily sufficient to prevent an epidemic establishing in the broader community.

On 15 November 2020, 3 community-acquired COVID-19 cases were reported in South Australia, one of these a hotel quarantine worker. These were the first community-acquired cases to be reported in South Australia in 5 months. 14 new cases of COVID-19 were reported in South Australia on 16 November 2020. This cluster has been linked to multiple high-risk settings, including an aged care facility, a correctional facility and a hospital.

Several public health alerts to self-quarantine immediately, and alerts to monitor for symptoms, have been issued by SA Health. Several jurisdictions including Queensland, Tasmania, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, have implemented border restrictions or quarantine requirements for SA or ‘Adelaide’ arrivals. This situation is rapidly evolving and will continue to be closely monitored by ACT Health Directorate.

ACT situational update

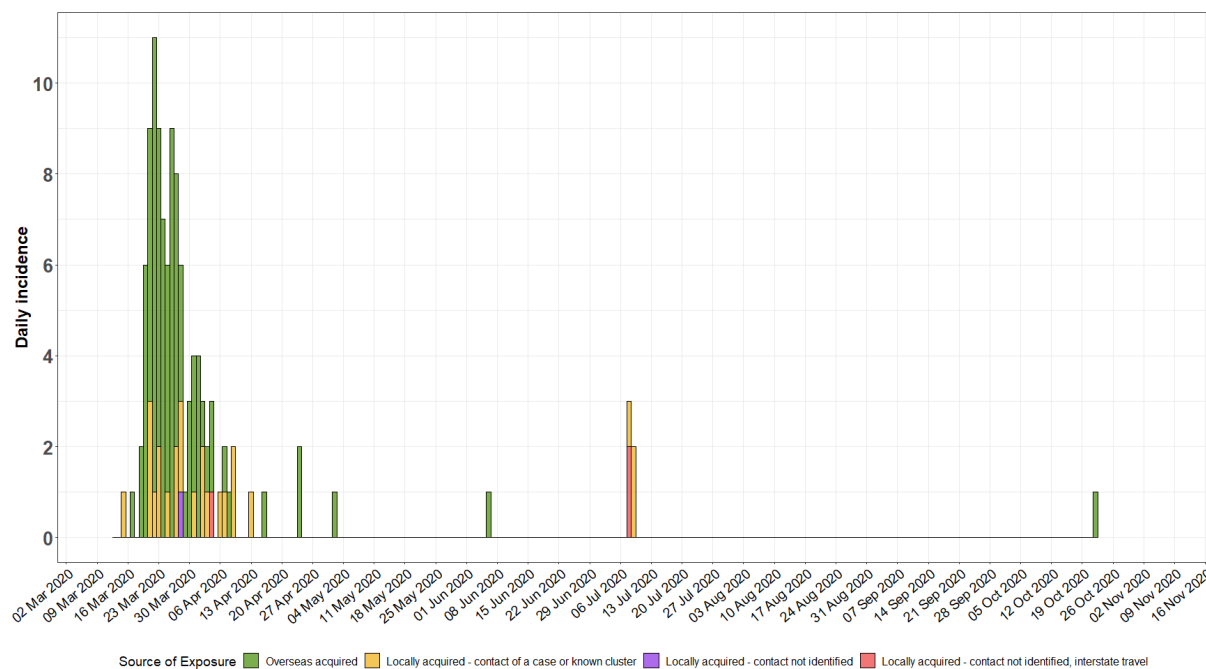
The most recent case of COVID-19 in the ACT was reported on 22 October 2020 and has since been cleared from isolation. The case’s two contacts were negative for COVID-19. The ACT’s total number of COVID-19 cases is 114.

The number of tests undertaken remains steady, with the testing rate approximately 1 test per 1,000 population per day. Consistently, a greater proportion of tests are undertaken in women and the rate of testing is highest in the 18 to 45-year age bracket.

Since the border restrictions were implemented, ACT Health Directorate has received more than 7,000 exemption applications to enter the ACT. Future exemption requests from Victoria are expected to decrease as border restrictions are eased. However, with the developing situation in South Australia, border restrictions may be imposed by NSW, Victoria or ACT, and exemption requests will subsequently increase. There are currently 205 persons in quarantine in the ACT as of 16 November 2020.

Compliance inspections continue to find issues among businesses with regards to complying with current public health directions, namely keeping COVID Safety Plans up-to-date and occupancy limits. Ongoing (re)engagement with businesses will be critical when moving towards the further easing of any restrictions.

Confirmed ACT COVID-19 cases by date of notification



Global situational update

Globally, as of 15 November 2020, there have been more than 53,000,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than 1,300,000 deaths reported to the World Health Organisation. The majority of new cases over the past 14 days have been reported in the European Region

(50 per cent), followed by the Americas (32 per cent). By country, the United States of America, India, France, Italy and the United Kingdom reported the most cases over the past 14 days. This resurgence in cases has resulted in many European countries, including the United Kingdom, France and Germany, re-introducing nationwide lockdowns, similar to those implemented in recent months in Victoria.

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 being asked to follow their COVID Safety Plans to support the safety of the community and their staff. All members of the community are being reminded to:

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

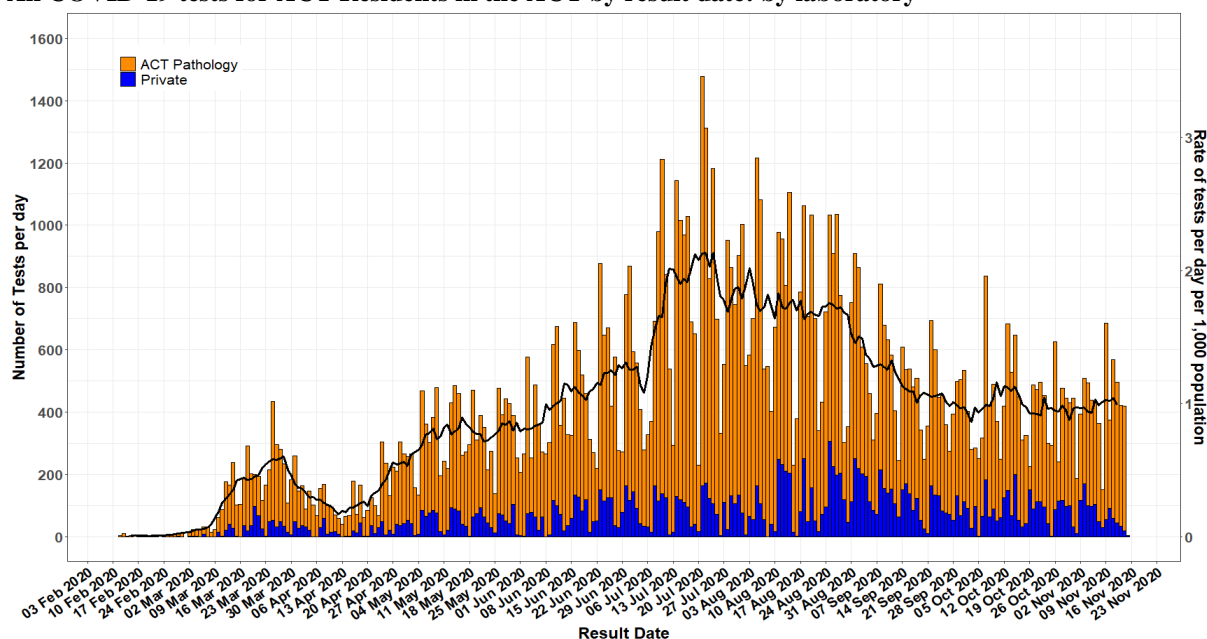
Surveillance and monitoring

Testing numbers continue to decline in the ACT, however the rate of testing over the previous 14 days continues to meet the currently agreed national benchmark of 1 test per 1,000 population per day. The proportion of tests reported in the previous 14 days in females was 56%. This is the same as the prior 14 days.

High rates of testing are essential to maintain rigorous surveillance and to closely monitor the situation as restrictions are eased. The community is being reminded to get tested if experiencing any of the common COVID-19 symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat and shortness of breath.

National surveillance and testing plans are being updated to reflect the evolving situation in Australia, where there is a low prevalence of infection and increasing fatigue with the pandemic. The ACT’s plans will be updated accordingly.

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



Wastewater testing

The ACT has joined the NSW Health Wastewater COVID Surveillance Programme. Currently, a sample of wastewater is collected weekly from the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Plant, which receives wastewater from over 99 per cent of the ACT population.

ACT Health and ICON Water are working together to investigate a sampling strategy which would increase the number of sampling sites and reduce the catchment areas to approximately 100,000 people.

Wastewater samples collected on 20 and 26 October, 2 November, 9 November and 16 November 2020 did not detect any trace of COVID-19.

Easing of restrictions

The ACT remains in a good position which has enabled further changes to restrictions to be made under strict COVID guidelines. Step 3.3 of Canberra's Recovery Plan commenced on 13 November 2020 allowing for:

- Gatherings to increase to 500 people, where one person per four square metres can be maintained in indoor spaces and one person per two square metres for outdoor spaces. This will assist with larger community events, with the COVID Safe Event Protocol providing guidance to event organisers around COVID safety for events.
- Patrons in an outdoor space can eat and drink while standing rather than having to be seated.
- All other current restrictions and venue capacity rules as part of Step 3.2 remain the same.

Easing restrictions leads to a higher risk of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases, in particular noting the ongoing risk of introduction of cases from NSW and cluster in SA. The impact of easing restrictions on COVID-19 case numbers in the ACT, as well as the impact of changes made in other jurisdictions, is being closely monitored to inform future decisions on easing restrictions. ACT Health Directorate is monitoring and assessing the impact of each step as public health control measures are gradually eased.

Conclusion

While the situation in Victoria has improved significantly, the continuing COVID-19 outbreaks and ongoing low-level community transmission in parts of NSW and most recently in South Australia serve as a strong reminder that the pandemic is not over. The significant worsening in many overseas countries as community restrictions are relaxed, with impacts on health systems and aged care facilities, highlights the challenges ahead. It also emphasises the central importance of a strong mandatory quarantine programme for overseas arrivals to reduce the risk of new cases being imported into Australia.

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee advises that parts of Australia will continue to see cases and periodic outbreaks. The ACT is focusing on implementing risk mitigation measures in response to the outbreaks and continuing enhanced surveillance in the community and outbreak planning for at-risk settings. Ongoing quality assurance of the hotel quarantine programme is a priority.

The ACT's focus is early detection of cases; preparedness to thoroughly investigate cases, clusters and outbreaks; and public messaging to community and businesses around the

importance of continuing to practise COVID safe behaviours. The community's continued adherence to health advice and public health directions remains critical 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 17 February 2021 due to the public health risk posed by COVID-19. It is 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.