

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 18 OCTOBER 2020

Declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT

A public health emergency declaration is in force in the ACT until 19 November 2020 due to the public health risk of COVID-19 to the ACT community.

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 15 October 2020, there have been a total of 27,341 COVID-19 cases in Australia and 899 deaths. Over the past week, there has been an average of 12 locally acquired and 8 overseas acquired cases reported each day, a notable improvement from the previous report.

National numbers continue to decrease, mostly due to falling numbers in Victoria, however cases continue to be detected in other jurisdictions predominantly in New South Wales. There has been an important fall in the proportion of cases that were locally acquired within Australia compared to overseas acquired (diagnosed in hotel quarantine): 60% (87/144) in the previous week compared to 97% (716/739) for the previous report.

In Victoria there have been an average of 7.5 cases per day notified in metropolitan Melbourne and 0.5 per day in regional Victoria over the last fortnight. While the downward trend is very promising, there remain 148 active cases. During this reporting period, two new outbreaks in regional Victoria have occurred from 'seeding' of active cases in metropolitan Melbourne. One of these appears to be well controlled, the second remains under careful watch.

On 7 September 2020, Victoria announced its Coronavirus (COVID-19) Roadmap to Reopening, which relies on the continuation of declining case numbers. Regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne each have their own roadmaps, relating to how many active cases are currently in the community. Regional Victoria remains at the Third Step of recovery, with metropolitan Melbourne at the Second Step with an announcement for a modified Third Step due to be made on 18 October.

NSW has maintained a steady number of locally acquired cases, and currently have 44 active cases. Most locally acquired cases in the last week have been linked to known cases or clusters. NSW spread has been predominately in Western and South Western Sydney. The ACT Health Directorate continues to watch the case numbers closely in our neighbouring jurisdictions.

Queensland currently has 4 active cases. All new cases reported in the last month have been acquired overseas and identified in hotel quarantine.

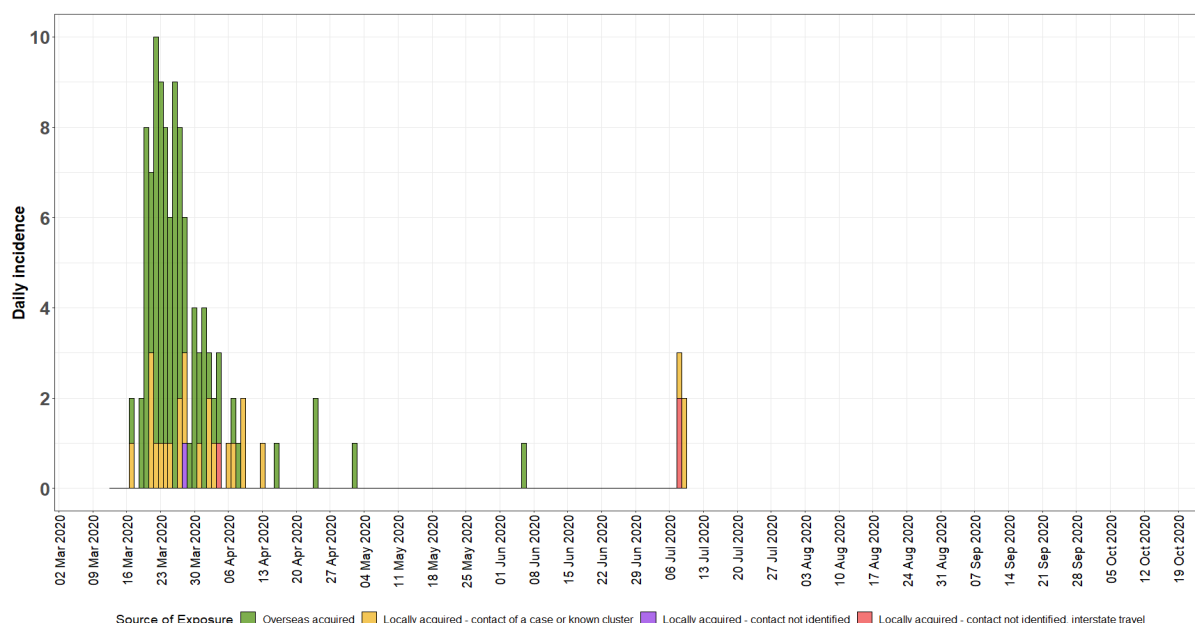
ACT situational update

There have been no COVID-19 cases notified for 98 days in the ACT, and no potential local or community transmission for 185 days.

ACT Health was notified of an asymptomatic case of COVID-19 who transited through Canberra airport for one and a half hours on 7 October 2020. While the test was taken on 10 October 2020; the source of infection is unknown. She presents a low transmission risk to Canberrans, as she wore a mask the entire time, was asymptomatic and returned a low positive result on 10 October and a negative result on 13 October. ACT Health contact traced the plane in accordance with national guidelines.

Since the border restrictions with Victoria were implemented, ACT Health Directorate has received more than 5,000 exemption applications to enter the ACT. The team is currently managing 295 people in quarantine, of whom 73% are in home quarantine. Of all those in quarantine 51% are travellers from Victoria (including Members of Parliament). Of the 139 travellers from overseas, 81% (113/139) are diplomats, government officials and/or their families. Quarantine compliance continues to be monitored by ACT Policing.

Confirmed ACT COVID-19 cases by date of notification



Global situational update

The rate of cases and fatalities continue to accelerate in many regions of the world, with the World Health Organisation reporting a total of more than 38 million cases worldwide and over 1,100,000 deaths. A number of countries are experiencing a ‘second wave’ or resurgence of COVID-19 cases leading to the reintroduction of restrictions. Community transmission is being reported in many countries throughout Europe, Central and South America, and South-East Asia, and in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. This poses a significant ongoing risk to Australia of importation of COVID-19.

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.

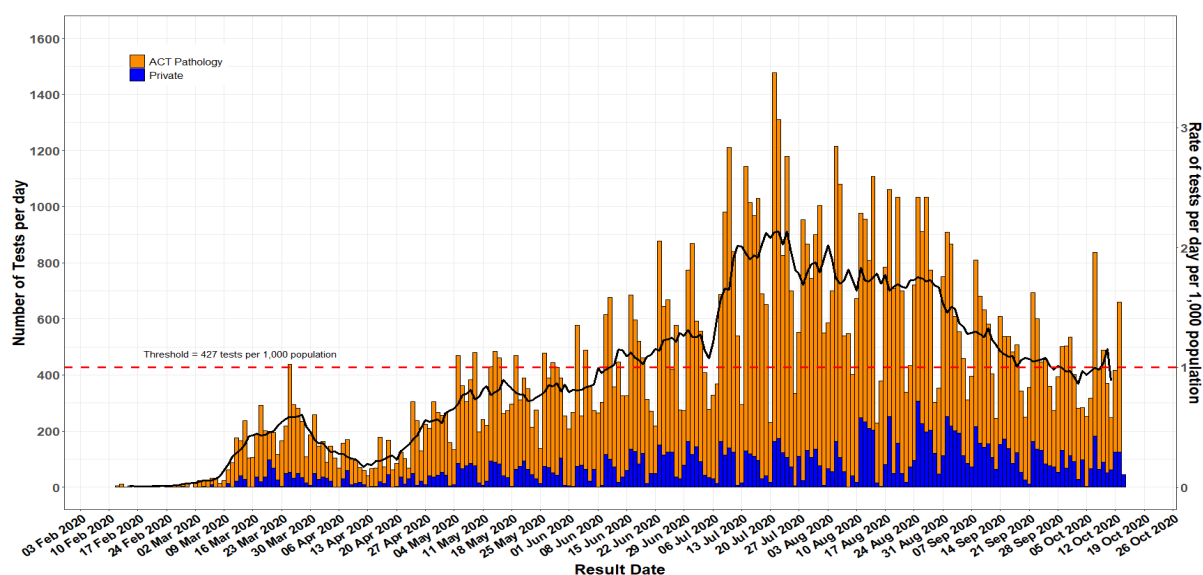
Surveillance and monitoring

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 Plans will be updated accordingly.

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



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 3.2 of Canberra's Recovery Plan commenced on 9 October 2020 allowing for:

- All gatherings to increase to 200 people, where one person per four square metres can be maintained in indoor spaces and one person per two square metres for outdoor spaces,

- Medium-sized hospitality venues with total usable space between 101 and 200 square metres can have 50 people throughout the venue (excluding staff). If they wish to have more than 50 people, they can calculate their capacity based on the one per four square metres of usable indoor space and one per two square metres of outdoor space rule,
- Large indoor seated venues can have ticketed events of no more than 50% capacity, up to 1,000 people, provided they have a COVID Safe Plan for each specific event,
- Enclosed outdoor venues with permanent tiered seating and grandstands can have no more than 50% capacity, up to 1,000 people, provided they have a COVID Safe Plan for each event, and
- Cinemas and movie theatres can sell up to 50% capacity of each theatre, up to 200 people.

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. 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 over the last 4 weeks, the continuing COVID-19 outbreaks and ongoing low-level community transmission in metropolitan Melbourne and parts of NSW 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.

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.

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 remain in place until 19 November 2020 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.