

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 18 SEPTEMBER 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 17 September 2020, there have been a total of 26,779 COVID-19 cases in Australia and 824 deaths. Over the past week, there has been an average of 44 new cases reported each day, with the majority reported in Victoria.

Though numbers continue to decrease, cases continue to be detected in other jurisdictions, predominantly in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Notably, 97% (716/739) of cases reported nationally in the last week were locally acquired within Australia (i.e. not diagnosed in hotel quarantine).

The downward in the number of daily cases reported in Victoria continued over last fortnight. Cases continue to be driven by community transmission, with numerous active outbreaks across a range of settings and locations, especially within the Greater Melbourne region. 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. From 13 September 2020, Victoria took the first steps towards easing of restrictions. From 16 September, further restrictions have been eased in regional Victoria, allowing for greater movement of people and increases on numbers in household and outdoor gatherings.

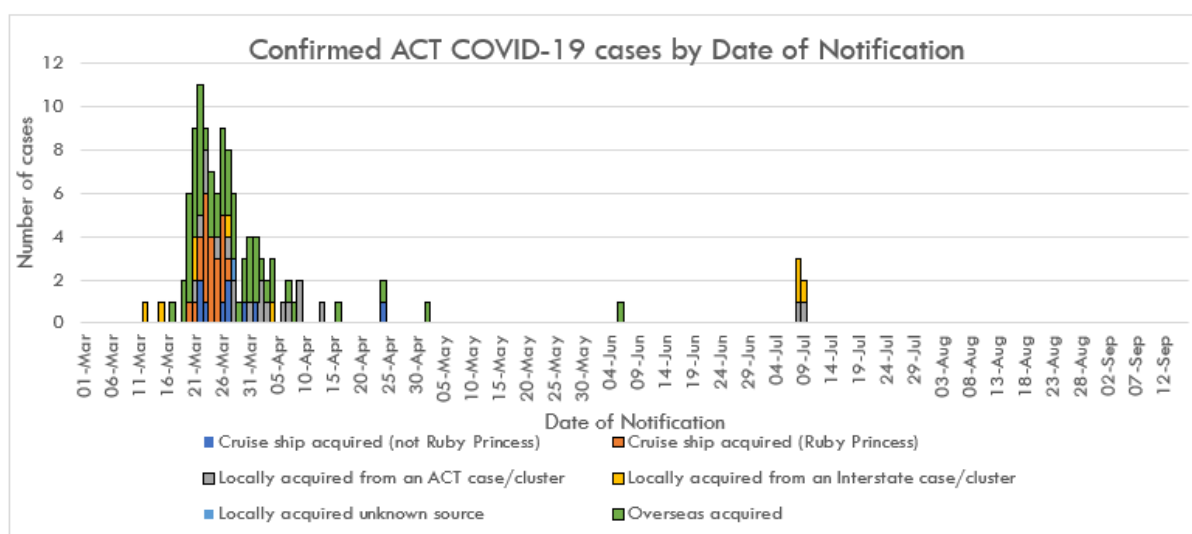
NSW has maintained a steady number of locally acquired cases, with a decrease in average daily numbers in the last week. Most locally acquired cases in the last week have been linked to known cases or clusters. NSW spread has been predominately in Western and South Western Sydney. The ACT Health Directorate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

Queensland currently has 28 active cases in Queensland, mainly in metropolitan areas (West Moreton and Metro South). The last locally acquired cases associated with local transmission were reported on 12 September 2020.

ACT situational update

The ACT has recorded 113 COVID-19 cases and three deaths. There have been no COVID-19 cases notified for 70 days in the ACT. Testing numbers have continued to decline since the peak in July, although the rate continues to meet the national benchmark of 1 per 1,000 population per day.

Since the border restrictions with Victoria were implemented, ACT Health Directorate has received more than 4,000 exemption applications to enter the ACT and are currently managing 307 (down from 400 in the previous report) people in quarantine. They are predominantly returning from Victoria, diplomats, government officials and/or their families. with support provided by ACT Health Directorate. Quarantine compliance is being monitored by ACT Policing.



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 28 million cases worldwide and over 900,000 deaths. A number of countries are experiencing a ‘second wave’ or resurgence of COVID-19 cases leading to the reintroduction of restrictions.

COVID-19 confirmed cases	Global ¹	Australia ²	ACT ³
Total confirmed	28,637,952	26,779	113
Total recovered	Not reported	23,787	110
Total deaths	917,417	824	3

- https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200914-weekly-epi-update-5.pdf?sfvrsn=cf929d04_2 [access date 18 September 2020, data from 10:00 CEST, 14 September 2020]
- <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> [access date 18 September 2020, data from 1500hrs 17 September 2020]
- <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/> [access date 19 September 2020, data from 09:00am 18 September 2020]

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.

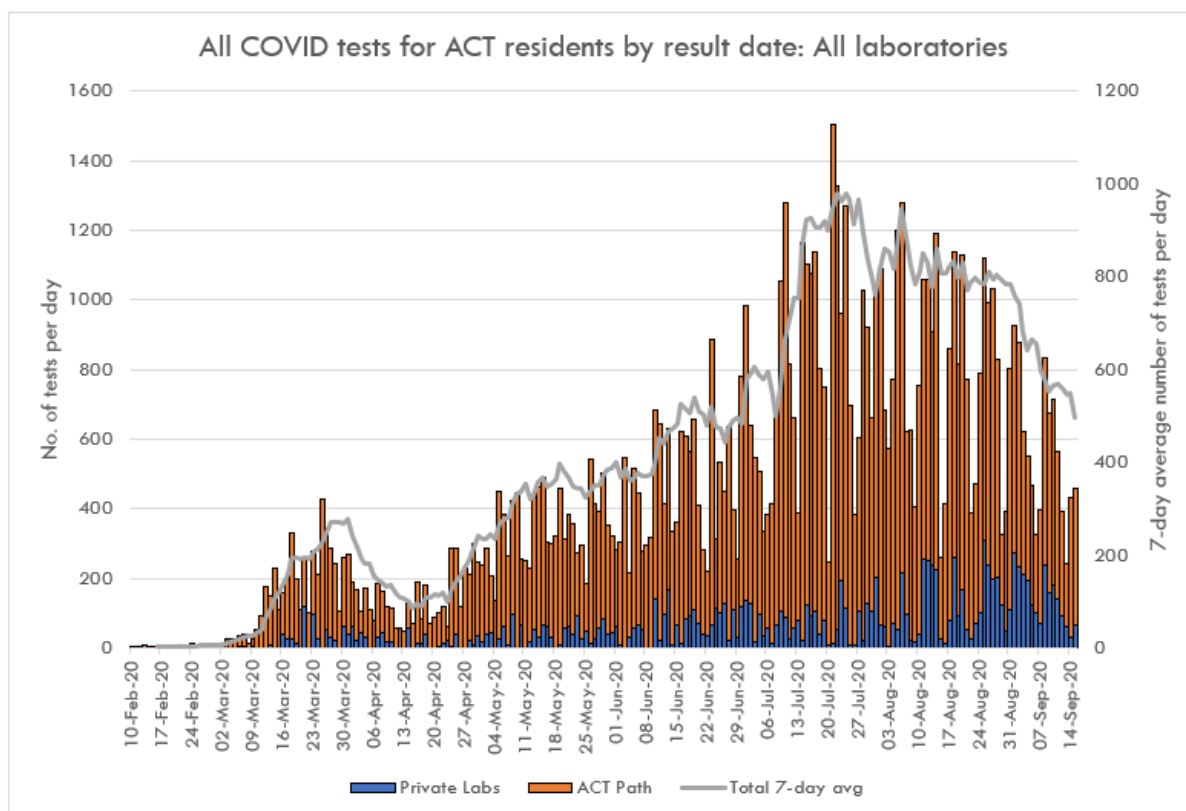
Businesses are being asked to follow their COVID Safety Plans to support the safety of the community and their staff. All members of the community are being reminded to:

- 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 in the ACT are consistently high, with over 89,000 negative tests conducted to date (as at 18 September 2020). Increased demand for COVID-19 testing over recent months has seen three additional testing clinics opened in West Belconnen and Garran, and the commencement of a new drive-through facility in Kambah.

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.



Easing of restrictions

The ACT is in a good position which has enabled minor and cautious changes to restrictions for a small number of businesses and activities to recommence under strict COVID guidelines.

A minor easing within Step 3.1 of Canberra’s Recovery Plan commenced on 18 September 2020. The change has allowed for all venues, regardless of size, to have 25 people. If venues

wish to have more than 25 people they must use 1 person per four square metre rule (maximum 100 per indoor or outdoor space).

Easing restrictions leads to a higher risk of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases. 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

The continuing COVID-19 outbreaks in Victoria and ongoing community transmission serve as a strong reminder that the pandemic is not over. 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.