

**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 9 – 14 December 2020**

**Presented by  
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# **CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 14 DECEMBER 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 remain in place at this time 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 14 December 2020, there have been a total of 28,031 cases of COVID-19 in Australia and 908 deaths. In the last week there have been 67 overseas acquired notifications in hotel quarantine. There are currently an estimated 56 active cases in Australia with no locally acquired cases reported across the country over the past eight days. The majority of cases reported nationally in the past fortnight were overseas acquired and diagnosed in hotel quarantine.

In NSW, only one locally acquired case has been reported over the past 14 days; a person who was working in a quarantine hotel in NSW. Extensive contact tracing and testing was undertaken in relation to this case and no ongoing transmission has been detected, as at the date of this report. This was the first locally-acquired case in NSW with a recent infection in 26 days.

South Australia no longer has any active cases, leaving a total of 33 cases associated with the Parafield/Medihotel cluster. All outbreaks/clusters associated with the Medihotel are now closed. As a result of the improving situation in South Australia, travellers from South Australia to the ACT are no longer required to complete an online direction prior to entering the ACT.

## **ACT situational update**

There were two cases reported in the ACT in the past 14 days. Both cases were recently cleared and therefore, there are currently no active cases.

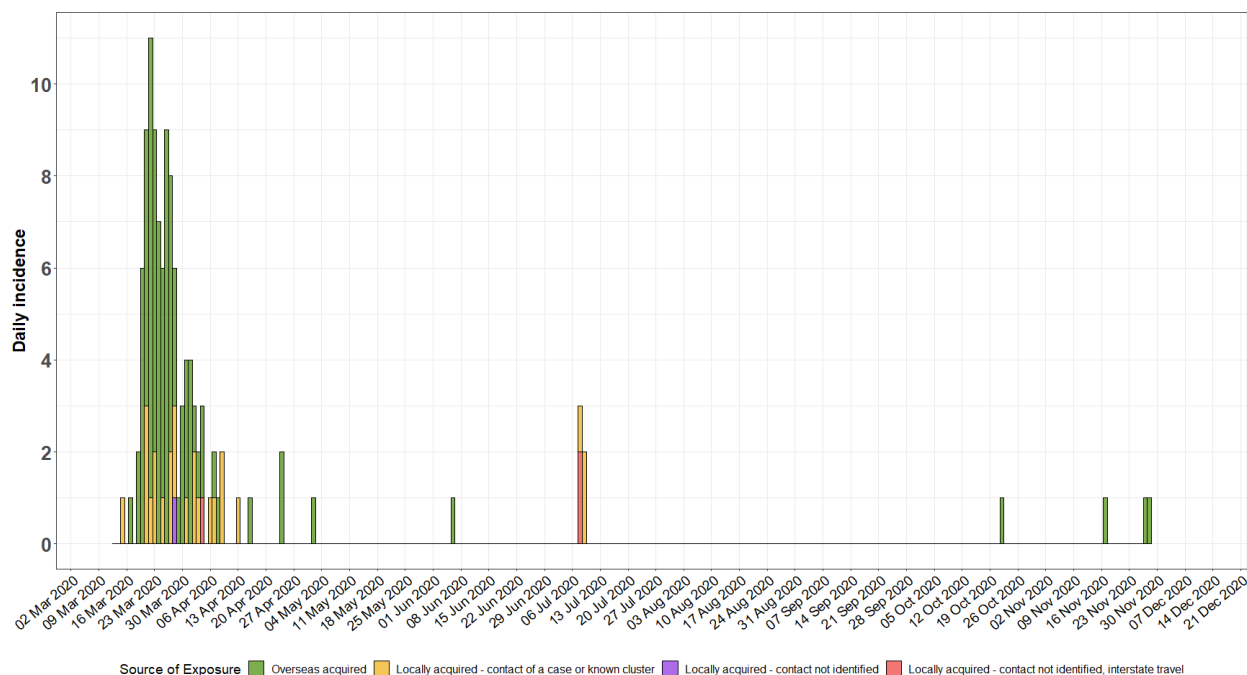
Since international and jurisdictional border restrictions were implemented, the ACT Health Directorate has received more than 8,300 exemption applications to enter the ACT. There are currently 254 persons in quarantine in the ACT; the majority are returned overseas travellers.

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 maintain current occupancy limits. Ongoing (re)engagement with businesses will be critical when moving towards the further easing of any restrictions.

On 26 November 2020, the ACT received an Australian Government-facilitated international flight from Singapore. All passengers travelling to the ACT from this flight entered mandatory hotel quarantine and concluded their quarantine on 10 December 2020. There was one COVID-19 case identified at day 1 screening from this flight.

In response to Victoria and South Australia experiencing community transmission linked to the hotel quarantine environment and following on from the National Review of Hotel Quarantine, ACT Health introduced a hotel quarantine staff health surveillance program on 25 November 2020, titled the Safeguarding Canberrans (SCAN) Program. There have been no cases among staff in the SCAN Program.

### Confirmed ACT COVID-19 cases by date of notification



### Global situational update

Globally, as of 13 December 2020, there have been more than 70,000,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than 1,599,000 deaths reported to the World Health Organisation. Most continents are experiencing a strong resurgence in cases which has resulted in many countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Canada introducing lockdown measures. Some Asian countries such as South Korea which had previously controlled the spread of the virus, are now experiencing a new peak in cases.

### 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.

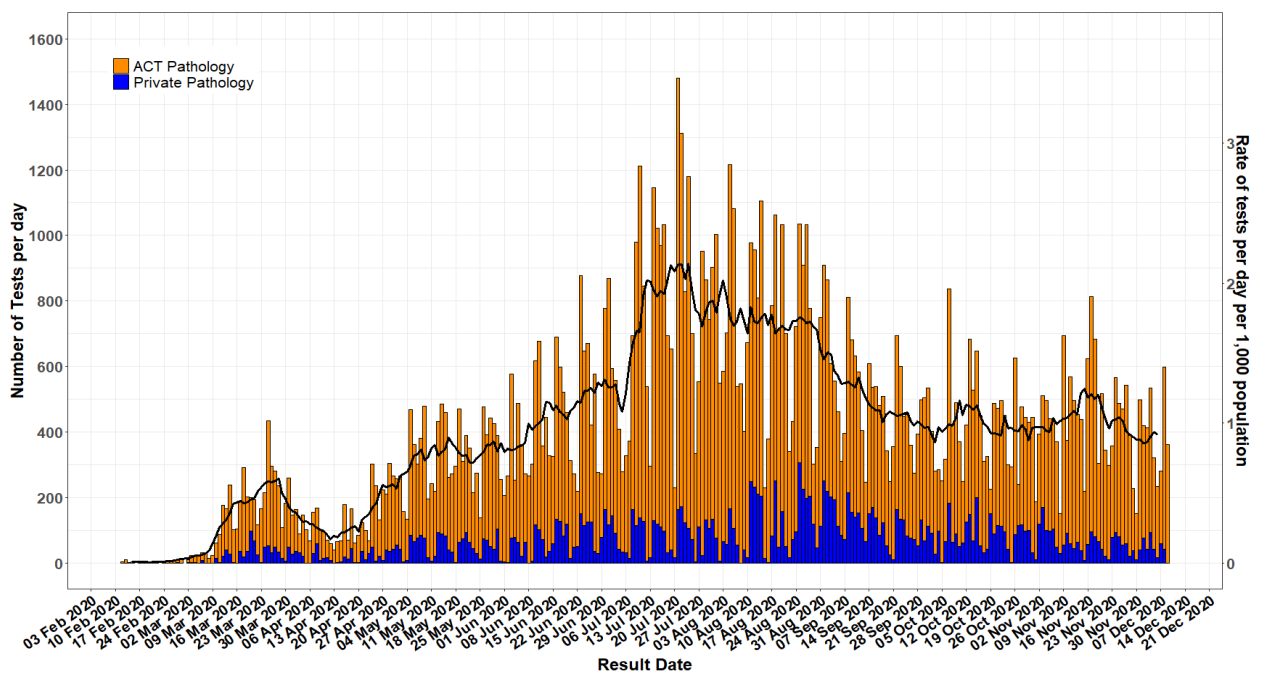
## Surveillance and monitoring

The number of tests undertaken in the past 14 days is less than the previous 14 days, with the testing rate falling below 1 test per 1,000 population per day. Testing rates continue to fall steadily in all age groups and genders. 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.

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: all laboratories



## Wastewater testing

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. In the last fortnight, 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. SARS-CoV-2 has not been detected in recent wastewater samples collected.

## Easing of restrictions

The ACT remains in a good position which has enabled further changes to restrictions to be made under strict COVID guidelines. Stage 4 of Canberra's Recovery Plan commenced on 2 December 2020, allowing for:

- Businesses and venues that want to have more than 25 people across their venue can apply the one person per two square metres of usable space rule in both indoor and outdoor spaces provided they use the Check In CBR app to collect patron contact details.
- Large indoor performance venues can have up to 65 per cent capacity, up to 1,500 people, provided events are ticketed and seated.
- Enclosed outdoor venues with permanent tiered seating and grandstands can have up to 65 per cent capacity, up to 1,500 people, provided events are ticketed and seated.
- GIO Stadium and Manuka Oval can have up to 65 per cent capacity, provided events are ticketed and seated.
- Exemptions can be granted for events and gatherings for up to 8,000 people on application via the COVID Safe Event Protocol. Gatherings greater than 500 people require an exemption.
- Patrons must still be seated when consuming alcohol in indoor spaces.

From 11 December 2020, further easing of restrictions came into effect with nightclubs allowed to reopen with the same occupancy conditions as licensed venues. Patrons in nightclubs must also continue to remain seated whilst consuming alcohol.

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 and assessed to inform future decisions on easing restrictions. It is anticipated that the current level of restrictions will be maintained until February 2021. This will provide an opportunity to assess the situation following the summer holidays which will see an increased movement of people around the country.

## **Conclusion**

The situation in Australia has improved significantly, with a reduction in ongoing low-level community transmission in NSW and most recently in South Australia. However, the situation across the world is a reminder that the pandemic is not over and the risk of new cases remains high. 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 remain in place 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.