

2020

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

**CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH
EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19**

26 JUNE 2020

**Presented by
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
Minister for Health
23 July 2020**

Minister for Health

Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA

ACTING CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 26 JUNE 2020

Dear Minister

Please find herein my report to you, as Minister for Health, in relation to the declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT due to COVID-19.

Section 119 (4B) of the *Public Health Act 1997* provides that if the “COVID-19 declaration has been extended or further extended under subsection (4), the chief health officer must advise the Minister at least every 30 days about—

- (a) the status of the emergency; and
- (b) whether the chief health officer considers the declaration is still justified.”

Minister, my advice is that COVID-19 continues to pose a public health risk to the ACT community. My recommendation to you, as of 26 June 2020, is that the public health emergency declaration in the ACT be extended for a further 45 days, from 7 July 2020 to 21 August 2020 to enable sufficient measures to continue to limit the spread and risk of COVID-19 to the community. This is particularly important due to the heightened risk of community transmission as restrictions ease.

Australian jurisdictions are maintaining public health emergency status or similar at this time and continue to focus on the suppression of COVID-19 as restrictions are gradually eased.

Yours sincerely



Dr Vanessa Johnston

Acting Chief Health Officer

26 June 2020

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 26 JUNE 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. This declaration currently remains in place until 7 July 2020, subject to ongoing review. It enables the Chief Health Officer to take the 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.

The ACT's public health response has been guided by the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee and National Cabinet. National and Territory restrictions have included the closure of Australia's border to non-residents, mandatory 14-day quarantine of persons returning from overseas travel, restrictions on domestic travel, restrictions on public and private gatherings and closure of non-essential businesses and services.

Australia and the ACT: Current status

Australia has been successful in reducing the effective reproduction rate of COVID-19. Efforts to suppress the virus are continuing in all jurisdictions with the aim of avoiding a resurgence in cases while gradually easing public health restrictions. The combination of measures implemented have been effective in flattening the curve to date. These restrictions assisted the ACT in becoming the first Australian jurisdiction to achieve zero active cases.

However, some jurisdictions are still experiencing new cases each day, as well as new outbreaks, and the ACT's borders remain open to individuals travelling from other Australian jurisdictions. This highlights the need to continue planning for the possibility of a resurgence of cases and clusters, particularly in vulnerable populations and high-risk settings such as residential aged care facilities, hospitals, and correctional and detention facilities. Australia also continues to receive flights of repatriated citizens and permanent residents from overseas, including flights landing in the ACT. Given escalating COVID-19 case numbers in many countries, some individuals on these repatriation flights are likely to have been exposed to COVID-19 whilst abroad.

In Australia, as of 25 June 2020, there have been 7,558 COVID-19 cases and 104 deaths related to COVID-19. The rate of cases and fatalities continue to accelerate in many regions of the world, with the World Health Organization reporting it expects a total of 10 million cases will be reached within the next week.

COVID-19 confirmed cases

	Global ¹	Australia ²	ACT ³
Total confirmed	9,296,202	7,558	108
Total recovered	Not reported	6,942	105
Total deaths	479,133	104	3

1. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200625-covid-19-sitrep-157.pdf?sfvrsn=423f4a82_2 [access date 26 June 2020, data from 10:00 CEST, 25 June 2020]
2. https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert?utm_source=health.gov.au&utm_medium=redirect&utm_campaign=digital_transformation&utm_content=health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov [access date 26 June 2020, data from 25 June 2020]
3. <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/> [access date 26 June 2020, data from 09:00am 26 June 2020]

The ACT community's response

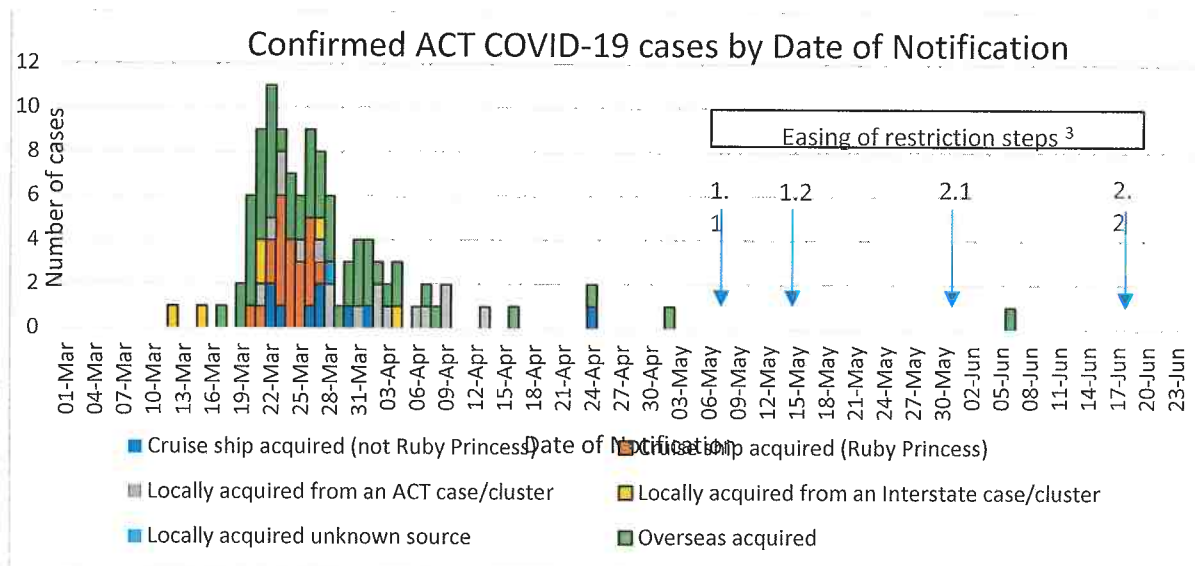
The Canberra community has played a vital role in slowing the spread of COVID-19 by following health advice and complying with public health directions. Businesses have been engaged and innovative in working to ensure the safety of staff and customers. Businesses have been asked to follow their COVID Safety Plans to support the safety of the community and their staff, and to ensure the ACT continues its suppression of COVID-19. 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.

These behaviours represent the new norm, rather than a return to pre-COVID state. It is vitally important that the community continues these behaviours to suppress the virus in the months ahead.

ACT summary report

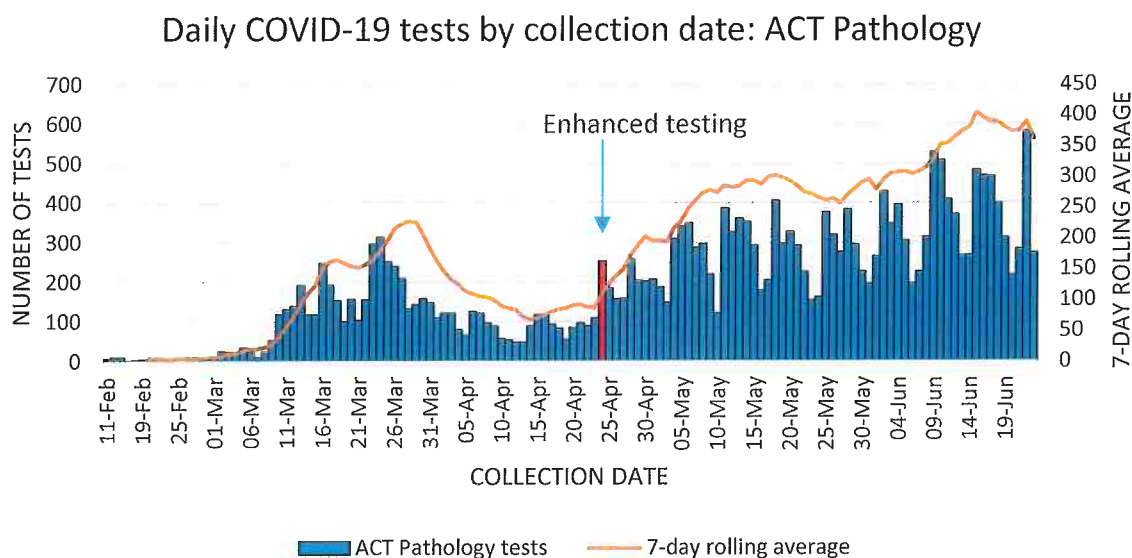
As of 26 June 2020, the ACT has recorded 108 cases of COVID-19; 105 of these cases have recovered from the disease and there have been three deaths. The case fatality rate in the ACT is 2.8 per cent. The ACT has not had a new case of COVID-19 for 20 days. All cases in the ACT have been linked with a known source of exposure, apart from one case for which an identified source of exposure was not able to be ascertained. Most of the ACT's COVID-19 cases have been overseas travellers, including passengers on cruise ships. A total of 16 cases were admitted to hospital and six patients to the Intensive Care Unit.



There continues to be no evidence of community transmission of COVID-19 in the ACT. Despite the ACT's excellent position, a small number of new active cases continue to be notified across Australia, including in neighbouring NSW (albeit in low numbers). Recently, there have been a number of outbreaks detected in Victoria, as well as an increase in cases with no known exposure source, reflecting community transmission. The situation in Victoria is rapidly evolving. There is a large-scale testing blitz underway in Melbourne suburbs identified as current "hotspots" and a tightening of restrictions was announced in Victoria this week. The recent spike in cases in Victoria represents a potential source of further cases and outbreaks in the ACT, particularly as travel and other restrictions are eased.

Surveillance and monitoring

The ACT is continuing a program of enhanced testing for COVID-19 that involves testing symptomatic people who have no specific risk factors for COVID-19 exposure. This program has seen testing rates steadily increase since April 2020. Testing criteria now include any person with symptoms that could be related to COVID-19. As at 25 June 2020, the ACT had conducted over 27,945 tests (positive and negative). Multiple free testing sites are available to the public including a drive through testing clinic at EPIC, and an assessment and testing centre at the Weston Creek Walk-in Centre. At present, the risk of undetected COVID-19 cases in the ACT is considered to be low; however, it is essential to maintain rigorous surveillance and closely monitor the situation as restrictions are eased.



Easing of restrictions

In May 2020, the ACT commenced easing restrictions informed by the *3 Step Framework for a COVIDSafe Australia*, approved by National Cabinet. As public health control measures are gradually eased in the ACT and Australia, public health experts are monitoring and assessing the impact of each step.

Easing restrictions leads to a higher risk of resurgence of COVID-19. Procedures are in place to identify cases early to mitigate the risk of community transmission. 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.

The decision to progress to Step 2.2 easing of restrictions (as per the ACT's Recovery Plan) has allowed for additional easing of restrictions in relation to gathering sizes than was originally proposed for Step 2.2, in view of the ACT's excellent position. Larger gatherings present higher risks; however, the ACT has successfully implemented Step 2.1 of the Recovery Plan and is progressing well through Step 2.2, with no evidence of community transmission. Our COVID-19 communicable diseases team has the capacity to quickly identify and minimise risks as new cases are identified.

Conclusion

As we continue through the next phase of the COVID-19 epidemic in the ACT, we are maintaining a focus on enhanced surveillance in the community and continued outbreak planning for at-risk settings, including aged care facilities, residential facilities, correctional and detention facilities, and hospitals. Travellers returning from overseas continue to be screened on arrival and quarantined for 14 days.

We are monitoring for evidence of community transmission as public health control measures are relaxed and assessing the effects of each change in restrictions. The experience of some other countries around the world, and in some Australian jurisdictions, has demonstrated the risk of outbreaks or resurgence in cases as restrictions are lifted, due to factors such as increased social mixing. Our focus is therefore on 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 Acting Chief Health Officer, I advise the Minister for Health that as of 26 June 2020 the public health emergency declaration should remain in place in the ACT for a further 45 days beyond 7 July 2020. While the ACT is in a favourable position it remains necessary to maintain public health control measures to safeguard against a resurgence of COVID-19 cases. All Australian jurisdictions are maintaining public health emergency status or similar at this time and continuing to focus on suppression of COVID-19 as restrictions are carefully eased.