

COVID-19 update

with Dr Mark Veitch

Director of Public Health

As I write this, Tasmanians are experiencing our first winter with COVID-19 circulating in our population. Pandemic viruses infect populations in waves. We have experienced the disruptions of large waves of COVID-19 infections in January and then March-April this year. At least a third of us have been infected and more than 100 people have died. With a high incidence of the Omicron BA.5 subvariant now in our small, connected population, many of us are tired of COVID-19.

“ Stay informed about the current level of risk. ”

Our challenge is to walk a line between hoping COVID-19 will go away and returning to the measures we used when we were an unvaccinated population. Neither of these extreme approaches is proportionate. We must use a range of measures to manage COVID-19.

For many months we have all been preparing for living with COVID-19. This means managing and adapting to waves of COVID-19 while benefiting from high levels of vaccination in our population. Most of what we need to do is not new.

Stay informed

Stay informed about the current level of risk from COVID-19 in Tasmania, and advice on the measures that are appropriate for the circumstances at coronavirus.tas.gov.au



Be vaccinated

The best protection against complications of COVID-19 is to be up to date with your COVID-19 vaccinations.

The older you are, particularly if you have medical conditions, the more likely you are to get complications of COVID-19, and the more important it is that you get your boosters.



Dr Mark Veitch

Get tested

Get tested for COVID-19 as soon as you have any cold or flu symptoms. You can test yourself using a Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) or book in for a free PCR test. Free RATs are available to people who have symptoms or are close contacts - fill in the request form on the coronavirus website.

If you still have symptoms after several negative RATs, get a PCR test.

Get advice on treatment

Oral antiviral treatments for COVID-19 are now available. These reduce the risk of complications. If you are aged 70 years or older you are eligible. Some younger people with specific health conditions are also eligible.

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coronavirus.tas.gov.au

You get the most benefit from treatment by starting it as soon as possible after symptom onset. If you are eligible, and test positive, arrange treatment through your GP or through COVID@homeplus.

If you are visiting your doctor, discuss a plan for getting treatment if you catch COVID-19 in the future.

Follow the public health requirements of cases and contacts

If you have COVID-19 you must isolate for at least seven days. If your RAT is positive, you must register this result with Public Health by calling **1800 671 738** or at [coronavirus.tas.gov.au](https://www.coronavirus.tas.gov.au), where you will also find information about what to do including telling your close contacts. If you test positive on a PCR test, the laboratory will notify Public Health.

If you are a close contact of a case of COVID-19, you must test for COVID-19 straightaway, test daily if you leave your home, wear a face mask indoors outside your home, inform your workplace and stay alert for symptoms. You are a close contact for seven days.

These are legal requirements under section 53 of the *Public Health Act 1997*.

Do the right things

The advice about how to reduce the COVID-19 risk to ourselves and others remains the same. These actions are more important when there is a lot of COVID-19 around.

- Wear a face mask in indoor public spaces and other places where you cannot physically distance.
- Try to keep some physical distance from others where you can.
- If you have new cold or flu symptoms, don't go to work, school or educational settings, or crowded places. Get tested. Stay at home until you are better.
- Cough into a tissue, dispose of the tissue and then wash or sanitise your hands.

Follow workplace requirements

Operators of workplaces are responsible for ensuring that workers, clients, and visitors to their sites are safe from harms. They do this by identifying and assessing risks and putting in place practicable measures to manage the risks. COVID-19 is one of these risks.

When you enter a workplace, you may be required to comply with requirements such as demonstrating vaccination status, wearing a mask, sanitising your hands, and following measures that help maintain physical distancing.

Where are we heading?

The COVID-19 pandemic has been very long, and things have constantly changed.

The severity of acute illness per infection has fallen, but waves of recent strains of the virus have spread more easily and resulted in large numbers of cases. Current vaccines provide valuable protection against complications of COVID-19 but very limited reduction of spread. Antiviral treatments are now available.

Ongoing symptoms after substantial recovery from acute COVID-19 are an important consideration; care pathways to assess and manage the various consequences of COVID-19 are being established.

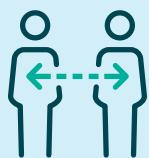
The evidence to guide public health and clinical actions also evolves. No disease has ever generated more research in such a short time.

I expect that in several months the Omicron BA.5 wave will be behind us. A new variant or subvariant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus will probably be among us. We will know what to do.

The way we live now to slow the spread of common respiratory infections will help protect those Tasmanians who are most vulnerable to severe illness from such infections.

Pandemics leave legacies. My hope is that lessons learnt from COVID-19 have a lasting, valuable impact on our lives and that useful precautions and behaviours become ordinary parts of the way we live our lives.

COVID-19 can still make you sick. What you do can reduce the risk.



keep your distance

Stay 1.5 metres from others where you can



stay home if sick

Do not attend work or school if you have cold or flu symptoms. Reduce the risk of spreading viruses.



got symptoms? get tested

You must stay home for at least 7 days if you test positive. Close contacts must test daily if leaving home.



wear a mask

Masks are recommended indoors and if you can't easily physically distance.



cover coughs and sneezes

Use a tissue or your elbow. Put used tissues in the bin immediately.



keep hands clean

Wash or sanitise your hands frequently



Be vaccinated

Stay up to date with your COVID vaccinations, including boosters.



Seek treatment

Look after yourself while unwell. You may be eligible for antivirals.

KEEP IT

COVID
safe

Public Health Hotline 1800 671 738
coronavirus.tas.gov.au

Oral antiviral treatments for COVID-19

Some people who test positive for COVID-19 are more at risk of becoming seriously ill and requiring hospital treatment. There are some early treatment medications (known as antivirals) that are available for people at higher risk. If you are eligible, you will need to access antivirals quickly after testing positive for COVID-19. With this in mind, it's a good idea to learn more about antivirals and make a treatment plan with your doctor or health care provider now.

For antiviral medicines to be effective at treating COVID-19 you need to start taking them within five days of symptoms starting. This is why you should make a treatment plan with your doctor before you get sick. It's also another reason it is critical to get tested for COVID-19 as soon as you have any cold or flu symptoms.

People who have a higher chance of getting very sick from COVID-19 and are eligible for treatment include:

- anyone aged 70 years or older
- anyone aged 50 years or older who has two or more risk factors
- anyone aged 30 years or older who is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and has two or more risk factors
- anyone who is over 18 and is immunocompromised or has a serious health condition.

See the coronavirus website for a full list of risk factors that may make you eligible.

Even if you have a higher chance of severe illness from COVID-19, antiviral medicines may not be right for you. The prescribing doctor will assess you to decide whether antivirals are needed and safe for you to take. They will consider other medical conditions you may have, and any other medications you are taking. COVID-19 treatments do not replace vaccination. Therefore, if you haven't already, make sure you are up to date with your vaccinations for COVID-19 and flu.

Once you have been prescribed antivirals, they can be purchased from a pharmacy. If you have tested positive to COVID-19 and are in isolation, speak to your pharmacy about whether delivery options are available.

“... treatments are not suitable for everyone, and they do not replace vaccination.”

For more information about eligibility, risk factors and antiviral medications, visit: coronavirus.tas.gov.au/treatments

How can I get COVID-19 treatments?

Step 1:

Make a treatment plan with your GP or health professional before you get sick, in case you test positive.

Step 2:

Take a rapid antigen (RAT) or PCR test at the first sign of symptoms.

Step 3:

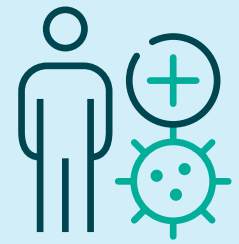
Report any positive RAT results online or phone the Public Health Hotline on **1800 671 738**.

Step 4:

If you test positive, speak to your GP or healthcare provider about any health risk factors and antiviral treatments.

If you don't have a regular GP, contact the [COVID@homeplus](mailto:COVID@homeplus.com.au) team.

COVID-19 cases and close contacts



Do you have COVID-19?

Yes



Isolate in suitable premises for 7 days. The day you had your test is day 0.

Positive result received via **Rapid Antigen Test**.



Notify Public Health of your result via the coronavirus website.

Positive result received via **PCR test**.



Notify your close contacts and workplace/ education setting.



You can leave isolation 7 days after the date of your positive test if:

- Respiratory symptoms (cough, runny nose, sore throat, or shortness of breath) have gone, or are much better.

AND

- You have not had a fever (or signs of fever such as chills or night sweats for at least 24 hours).

The reinfection period for COVID-19 is 28 days. If you have previously had COVID-19 and develop symptoms more than 28 days after your release from isolation, get tested. You can also become a close contact again 28 days after previous infection and must follow close contact rules.

No

Have you been told you are a **close contact**?

Yes

No

If you have symptoms, stay home and take a test.

Take a test:

- as soon as you find out you are a close contact
- every day that you leave the house for 7 days
- if you don't leave home every day, test again on day 6
- if you develop any symptoms.



Notify your workplace.

Close contacts are at higher risk of testing positive and passing the virus on.



Wear a face mask indoors when outside your home.



Do not attend high risk settings, such as hospitals and aged care unless accessing urgent care, or are there as part of your employment.



Monitor for symptoms and get tested if you develop symptoms.



If you test positive at any time, follow the rules for COVID-19 cases.

How is my business affected?

We all have a responsibility to protect ourselves and fellow community members against COVID-19 as we continue to respond to the pandemic.

All businesses and organisations have duties under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012* to provide a safe environment for workers, contractors and visitors in the workplace. With that in mind, we take a look at some common questions that business owners and operators have about their obligations and how to stay COVID-safe.

Q As a business what am I legally required to continue to do?

A Businesses are obliged under workplace health and safety (WHS) laws to provide a safe working environment for workers, contractors and visitors.

You should undertake a risk assessment and review your COVID-19 safety plan to effectively manage the risk of COVID-19 in your workplace.

A risk assessment helps identify the likelihood of transmission in your workplace, and the degree of harm the transmission might cause. You then identify the measures that you will put in place to reduce the likelihood and/or the harm, that could be caused.

Review your risk assessment and COVID-19 safety plan regularly, especially when changes to COVID-19 rules and community transmission occur.

You must do a risk assessment to meet your WHS duties. Document the measures you identify for your workplace in your COVID-19 safety plan.

Walk around your workplace with your workers to make sure all the measures are in place and working well. Identify a person or a resource for workers seeking additional information or support.

Q If I am unsure how to conduct a risk assessment or update/create a COVID-19 safety plan, where can I get help?

A The WorkSafe Tasmania Advisory Service or the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI) WHS Advisory Service can provide guidance on risk assessments and the COVID-19 control measures best suited for your business.

You can contact WorkSafe Tasmania on **1300 366 322**. The TCCI WHS Advisory Service can be contacted on **1300 559 112**.

Q What about other forms of support such as financial services or support for business recovery, transition or growth?

A Businesses needing support such as legal or financial advice are encouraged to consider the Tasmanian Government's Small Business Advice and Financial Guidance Program. Round two is open until 30 May 2023. Under this program a business can apply for grants of between \$750 and \$1,500 to engage a suitably qualified service provider.

Please contact Business Tasmania on **1800 440 026** for more information about this program and to find out about a range of free services they offer.

Q Can I legally ask a customer to leave if they are not observing COVID-19 measures in my workplace?

A Yes you can, but only if the COVID-19 measures you require them to observe are obvious to anyone who enters the workplace. This may be through a sign at the entry to the premises. The measures should be clearly described and easy to read.

Q Can I legally ask my worker to go home if they seem sick and what will I have to pay them if they don't have any leave available/are casual?

A Yes. You can ask a worker to go home if they have COVID-19 symptoms. Requiring workers to leave the workplace is a reasonably practicable step under WHS laws to protect the health and safety of other workers and visitors to the workplace. Best practice is to document this measure in writing, so that your workers and visitors are aware of the measure in advance.

If you send a worker home, their pay and entitlements will depend on the provisions in their employment contract, industrial award or industrial agreement. You should seek legal advice to clarify your obligations or contact the Fair Work Commission.

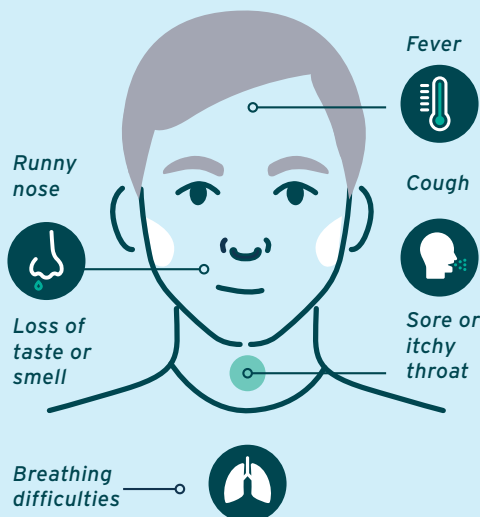
Q Can I ask my workers for evidence of a negative RAT if they are unwell?

A Yes. Some workplaces may require proof of a negative test. Some workplaces may require proof of a negative test to protect vulnerable people from respiratory illnesses like COVID-19 and flu. You should document this measure in writing, so that your workers and visitors are aware of the measure in advance.

If you have symptoms of COVID-19 or the flu, it is recommended you get tested.

For additional information for businesses and organisations visit coronavirus.tas.gov.au

COVID symptoms



COVID-19 can also cause:

- Headache
- Muscle/joint pain
- Nausea/vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue

What to do if you have symptoms:

No matter how mild the symptoms are, you must isolate immediately and get tested for COVID-19.

For more information call the Public Health Hotline on **1800 671 738** or visit the website: coronavirus.tas.gov.au/testing

Protect yourself from COVID-19 and the flu

Keeping up to date with vaccinations is the best way to help protect yourself and others from the worst impact of COVID-19 including severe illness, hospitalisation and death.

All vaccines, like those for COVID-19, are thoroughly assessed by the Therapeutic Goods Administration and have been subject to clinical trials that show that they are both safe and effective. Some people may have concerns or feel hesitant, however, in Tasmania we closely follow the recommendations and advice of the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) regarding vaccinations.

Staying up to date with your vaccinations is important to maintain your immunity during the ongoing pandemic. This includes having a third dose (booster), and a second booster (winter dose) if you are eligible.

If you have already had COVID-19, you may think that you are safe from infection. This is not the case. You should still continue with your vaccinations as some people are catching COVID-19 for the second or even third time.

We are likely to see high rates of infection over the next few months, not only of COVID-19, but other respiratory illnesses like the flu. It is therefore recommended that all eligible Tasmanians get their flu vaccination. You can get both your flu and COVID-19 vaccinations at the same time.

You can get vaccinated at some GP clinics, some local pharmacies or at a state-run community clinic.

For more information about vaccinations visit: coronavirus.tas.gov.au/vaccine

Book your COVID and flu vaccines



COVID-19 vaccinations available for everyone aged **5 years+**

COVID-19 booster vaccines available for everyone aged **16 years+**

COVID-19 winter dose available for everyone aged **30 years+**

Flu vaccinations available for ages **6 months+**



Vaccinations are available near you: state-run community clinics, some GP clinics and some pharmacies.



Find out where you can get vaccinated, and book an appointment:

Call the Tasmanian Public Health Hotline on **1800 671 738**

If you need an interpreter, press 1 after dialling the Hotline

coronavirus.tas.gov.au/vaccine