

Speeches (/speeches)

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NZ to move to Red



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Prime Minister (/portfolio/labour-2020-2023/prime-minister)

Nine COVID-19 cases reported yesterday in the Nelson/Marlborough region have now been confirmed as the Omicron variant, and a further case from the same household was confirmed late yesterday.

These cases are in a single family that flew to Auckland on 13 January to attend a wedding and other events on the weekend of January 15th and 16th and initial estimates suggest there were well over 100 people at these events.

This cluster has already lead to an additional infection of a fully vaccinated Air New Zealand flight attendant who picked it up on flight 5083 on January 16th from Auckland to Nelson that the family was on. That flight attendant has worked four additional flights while infectious.

We were also informed late yesterday of a further case who was at the wedding. But even more importantly we don't yet have a clear lead on the index case that links this family to the border, as we have with our other Omicron cases to date.

That means Omicron is circulating in Auckland and possibly the Nelson Marlborough region if not elsewhere.

On that basis as we have previously signaled the whole of New Zealand will move into the Red setting of the traffic light system at 11.59pm tonight, Sunday 23 January.

As I set out this week, our strategy is to slow the spread of omicron down.

This includes Boosters and public health measures such as mask wearing and restrictions on gatherings while keeping the pressure off our health system, to protect those most at risk of getting sick.

Our plan for managing Omicron cases in the early stage remains the same as Delta where we will rapidly test, contact trace and isolate cases and contacts in order to slow the spread.

Given our low number of Delta cases we currently have significant capacity in our system to attempt to stamp out outbreaks and our teams are already hard at work to contain this one.

But as we have seen elsewhere in the world Omicron is significantly more infectious and in due course we know we will see far more cases than we have in the two years of the pandemic to date. But the difference to previous outbreaks is that we are vaccinated and we are even better prepared.

Limiting the threat of Omicron will take a team effort, like we have done before, and there is one task that I am explicitly requesting New Zealanders to undertake as soon as possible – get boosted.

The evidence from overseas is that boosters significantly reduce the likelihood of getting sick and needing to go to hospital and also helps to reduce the transmission of the virus.

Most other countries have had to get boosted in the middle of their outbreaks. Our plan has given us a head start and around 56% of those eligible for a booster already have one, but we need to get that number higher quicker.

We need to use the coming weeks before the virus could significantly take off to get as many people boosted as possible. If it has been four months since your second dose you are due your booster. Please go to bookmyvaccine.nz to make an appointment or simply go to a local drive through, GP or pharmacy. The health point website has a list of all the vaccination sites in the country.

Vaccination sites are open today across the country and we will be standing up additional surge capacity this week, in anticipation that there will be additional people who will now be wanting to make sure their vaccine is up to date.

And for those of you with children aged 5 to 11, all children aged 5 to 11 can now be vaccinated and I encourage parents and caregivers to seek out information to help you make that important decision. Already around 20 percent of children aged 5-11 have been vaccinated or are booked to do so.

And now, a little more detail on the red settings.

Every region in New Zealand will move into the Red at midnight tonight. Even if your part of the country doesn't yet have Omicron the evidence from overseas is that it will soon. We know it is already in both the North and South Islands and that cases have been on a number of flights.

Our goal at Red is to slow the spread of the virus. Again the evidence from overseas is that those places that were slow to act have had more severe outbreaks.

So at Red life carries on pretty much as it does now, but with more mask wearing and distancing precautions and reduced gathering limits to lower the risk of picking up the virus and super spreader events.

Red is not lockdown. At Red businesses stay open and you can do most of things that you normally do, including visiting family and friends and travelling around the country.

But Red will make a difference, because it focuses in on those events that we know are high risk.

Hospitality businesses can open, but are capped at 100 people indoors and customers must be seated and separated.

Events and gatherings for vaccinated people are reduced to 100. If people at an event are not vaccinated, that reduces further to 25.

In retail and public places like libraries and museums there will be limits on those in a space based on the ability to maintain physical distancing.

Businesses and workplaces remain open but where a workplace deems it appropriate, they may choose to have employees work from home.

Education centres stay open, but with extra public health measures including mask wearing for everyone from year four and up. It is our intention for schools to return as planned. Over the summer, our education team has been working on additional measures to help support this safe return, including supporting the assessment of ventilation in our schools.

Our plan is simple – get boosted, wear a mask in indoor settings and outside when you can't distance from others, and reduce contact as much as is practical.

Omicron is now in more than 80 countries around the world. By delaying its arrival here we've had the time to kick off boosters, vaccinations for children, and prepare. I encourage everyone to use the coming days to take steps at home and with your family, neighbours and community to make a plan. Resources to help you do this are on the Unite Against Covid-19 website.

One of the most important things that people can do is to make sure you and your family have a buddy – like a neighbour or a friend - who can help you out by delivering things that you need if you do become unwell.

Help and support, including financial support, will be available for people who are isolating. Both the Leave Support Scheme and Short-Term Absence Payment are available for people who cannot work while they are isolating. Minister Robertson is here and will talk more to that shortly.

Earlier this week, I talked about the fact that through the course of managing omicron, we will be taking a staged approach. As case numbers grow both testing and isolation approaches will change in response.

We have been planning for three stages for Omicron.

Phase one will include the period where we have up to 1000 cases a day or less. We expect this scenario in the initial stages of the outbreak, and to last for up to 14 days.

At this stage, we are doing what we have successfully done with Delta – taking a 'stamp it out' approach. This will all be familiar to you:

Broadly speaking, that includes the same contact tracing, isolation, and request that everyone who is symptomatic be tested at a community testing station or at a primary health provider. PCR will continue to be used, but we will begin to integrate Rapid Antigen Tests into these sites as required.

If you are required to isolate, you will receive advice and – if needed – support to do so; at this stage you will need to isolate for 14 days if you are a case, and 10 days if you are contact.