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# Government announces three phase public health response to Omicron



**HON DR AYESHA VERRALL** (/MINISTER/HON-DR-AYESHA-VERALL)

Health (/portfolio/labour-2020-2023/health)

- Reducing isolation period for cases and close contacts at Phase Two and Three to 10 and seven days
- Definition of close contact required to isolate changes to household or household like contacts at Phase Three
- Increased use of rapid antigen tests with test to return policy put in place for health and critical workforce
- Greater use of technology, including text notifications for cases and close contacts and automated contact identification

The Government has announced a three phase Omicron plan that aims to slow down and limit the spread of an outbreak, Associate Minister of Health, Dr Ayesha Verrall announced today.

“Through the course of managing Omicron, we will be taking a phased approach. As case numbers grow both testing and isolation approaches will change in response,” Dr Ayesha Verrall said.

“Other countries have had to adapt their response in the middle of widespread outbreaks. We are setting out the changes ahead of large case numbers to give people a clearer idea of what to expect and what they need to do at each phase.

“Almost no country in the world has escaped Omicron and New Zealand is no exception. But where we can be an exception is how well we minimise the impact of the virus and protect our people from it.

"Vaccination remains our most effective weapon against the virus. The Omicron variant is markedly less severe, than prior variants. One US report suggests the hospitalisation rate is 10 times less than the Delta variant. Its transmission and severity is also reduced by vaccination.

"So far, we've been focused on keeping Omicron out of the community for as long as possible while we roll out vaccinations to children and boosters for our adult population.

"Now that it is here, we expect case numbers to grow rapidly and put our health system under considerable pressure.

### **The three phases for Omicron:**

#### **Phase One**

"Phase one is where we are now and we are doing what we have successfully done with Delta – taking a 'stamp it out' approach.

"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.

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

"Our objective is to keep cases as low as possible for as long as possible to allow people to be boosted and children to be vaccinated without Omicron being widespread.

#### **Phase Two**

"In Phase Two, our objective is to slow the spread and protect our vulnerable communities.

"The system will be adjusted to focus much more on identifying those who are at greater risk of severe illness from Omicron - which will be a smaller percentage of cases.

"In Phase Two, we will reduce the isolation period for cases to 10 days and contacts to seven days in line with best practice overseas.

"Household contacts will actively be managed by contact tracing services, with close contacts requiring a PCR test on day five.

"A rapid escalation in case numbers and the resulting pressure on our resources will also require us to shift from identifying all infected individuals to being more targeted to those most at risk and those needed to keep the country going.



“Digital technology is used more in this phase. Cases will be notified via text message and be directed to an online self-investigation tool which will focus on high risk exposures. Information will be provided via email and phone based interviews will still take place where it’s required. Other forms of support will be available to those who need it.

“We will also change our current testing requirements for critical workers who are close contacts of cases. The prime focus of testing and tracing will be protecting this workforce and those most vulnerable to becoming severely unwell.

“Phase Two is where we will see more widespread use of the test to return to work policy where asymptomatic contacts in critical workforces can return a negative rapid antigen test in order to go to work.

“We will continue to manage testing of symptomatic people and close contacts with PCR testing but we will be enabling ‘test to return’ for asymptomatic critical workers who are close contacts of cases using Rapid Antigen Tests. These are people like our healthcare workers and those working in food supply and infrastructure who are key to our response to COVID-19 and also in ensuring New Zealanders can continue to access the services they need.

“Rapid antigen tests (RATs) will be integrated into our testing system at this phase and will work alongside PCR tests.

“They will be useful when the laboratories cannot provide PCR results within a useful time frame because of large volumes or because of transport delays.”

### Phase Three

“At Phase Three, when cases are in the thousands, we will make further changes to contact tracing. The definition of contacts will change to household and household like contacts only. This will mean the highest risk contacts will need to isolate.

“Supported self-service, rapid antigen testing for diagnosing COVID and a self-service tool to enable identification of high risk contacts will be significant to respond to the high volumes of Omicron cases.

Digital technologies will continue to be utilised at this Phase, and people will be supported to self-notify close contacts. There will be continued support for those members of our community who are not digitally enabled.

The majority of people will be supported and be able to self-manage and isolate at home; and clinical care will focus on anyone with high needs.

Clinical care and welfare support will be targeted based on need.