

COVID-19 media conference — 14 February 2022 at 4pm

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Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern provides an update on our response to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 media conference starts at 4pm.

Speakers:

- Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern
- Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield

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Media conference

In full: NZ to move to Phase 2 of Omicron response



Video transcript — COVID-19 media conference: 14 February 2022

PM: Good afternoon, kia ora koutou katoa. Look, just for those who are tuning in at home, I apologise for the slight delay in the press conference today. I've been advised that we've had a positive rapid antigen test in the gallery. Just to acknowledge that it is a rapid antigen test, so it of course will need to go through the confirmation process of a PCR, because we know that they are not always 100 percent accurate. I do want to acknowledge that the gallery have put in place their own procedures to manage the news, so I just want to acknowledge that obviously not everyone that we usually would have in our gallery press conference is here, and I also acknowledge that everyone sitting in front of me is spaced

out and we've left the first two rows clear as well, given that we haven't got masks in use at the front of the room. So just want to thank the flexibility of the gallery, and acknowledge the procedures that you've put in place for your own safety.

Today, Cabinet confirmed decisions around the next stage of our Omicron plan. Around the world, over the past few months, we have watched Omicron cases grow sharply and quickly. And while its trajectory in New Zealand has been slowed by strong booster numbers and our traffic light protections, we are now seeing the increases that ultimately we did expect. This is what we planned for. While cases may seem high now, we are still early in our Omicron outbreak, and cases we do expect to grow further. As such, more people will come into contact with COVID, either testing positive or becoming a close or household contact. We know that the vast majority of vaccinated and boosted people who get Omicron will have mild symptoms and will be able to get well safely at home. This means we can move our focus to a phase of greater self-management for most New Zealanders as we shift our systems to those most likely to get seriously unwell, those who need more help, and to preserve our hospitals for those who need them. This does signal the start of a disruptive phase for many, and so our system also tilts towards minimising that disruption while protecting our most vulnerable.

That is why today, I can confirm that New Zealand will move to phase 2 of our Omicron plan from 11.59 p.m. tomorrow, Tuesday, 15 February. Just a brief outline of what happens at phase 2 and what it means for everyone. First, probably most important, point is the period for self-isolation reduces. The period of self-isolation for people who test positive for COVID-19 reduces from 14 days to 10 days. The period of self-isolation extends to their household contacts, so that means 10 days for them as well. We'll also enable that to be served concurrently. Now, that removes the potential for people in the same household as a case to have to isolate for long periods of time unless they themselves test positive. This is a significant change. It ensures household members only isolate for the period of their family members' 10 days of recovery—unless, of course, they contract COVID themselves. The period of self-isolation for close contacts reduces from 10 to seven days. That applies across the board, including at MIQ, noting there may be a few days needed to operationalise this change. That means those who are eligible to travel into New Zealand from Australia on 27 February will only be required to isolate for seven days.

These changes that we're making are based on good supporting evidence. We've seen in the last few weeks—and we've been taking a look and a close analysis of what's happening with transmission of Omicron amongst our close contacts in our households. And we've seen that 90 percent of household contacts who are going to test positive do so in those first 10 days—so there's good grounds for the changes that we're choosing to make now.

Here, though, I would encourage everyone to be developing a self-isolation plan. This includes identifying a buddy who can drop off essential items if needed. Anyone, of course, though, who experiences symptoms that get worse while they're isolating—particularly breathlessness—of course, we're still encouraging to call Healthline immediately.

Secondly, at phase 2, the close contact exemption scheme begins. Overseas, we've seen that large-scale spread of Omicron disrupts supply chains and the ability of critical services to keep functioning at 100 percent. So to ensure we can keep our critical workforces going over the next few months, this scheme means asymptomatic, vaccinated close contacts can keep going to work instead of isolating if they return a daily negative rapid antigen test.

Businesses have already been getting themselves ready in doing their self-assessments against criteria to join the scheme, and we've had a total of 5,620 so far. In discussing those applications or those who have already joined the scheme, very much in areas where we've expected, including the likes of food production. Once a business has signed up to the scheme, an employee who is a close contact without symptoms will be able to go to a provider, such as their local community vaccination clinic, and secure a pack of 10 rapid antigen tests (RATs). In some cases, rapid antigen tests are being supplied directly to large-scale critical workforces.

We've secured enough rapid antigen tests to deal with a widespread Omicron outbreak, with 7.2 million currently in the country and more arriving over the next week. While cases will still be diagnosed by the more familiar PCR tests, in the spirit of speeding up our work to rule out the virus, RATs will start to be used more widely, including in the close contact exemption scheme and throughout high-risk settings, like for visitors to aged-care facilities as Dr Verrall set out earlier today.

Number three, the other key thing people will notice at phase 2 is the greater use of digital and automation to speed up interactions. For example, a case at the start of self-isolation will fill out an online form for themselves and their household contacts that will help the health service work out