

2020

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

**UPDATE ON THE ACT GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS
(COVID-19)**

**Presented by
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13 August 2020**

The ACT remains in a strong position with respect to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency. There are currently no active COVID-19 cases and it has been 34 days since the last COVID-19 case was notified in the ACT.

Testing

The Government's priority is testing people who present with symptoms and doing this as quickly as possible. The Government has continued to encourage any Canberran who develops any symptoms of COVID-19, however mild, to come forward and get tested. The main symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, cough, sore throat and shortness of breath, which can develop between two to 14 days after being exposed to the virus.

Numerous, free testing sites are available for people with COVID-19 symptoms or people who have been told by a public health official to get tested. We have responded to the increased demand for testing by opening three additional, free testing sites to provide Canberrans with more options.

At this time, the ACT's testing numbers remain high, with more than 61,000 tests conducted to date.

National situation

At this time, the majority of states and territories in Australia have low, or no case numbers, with all jurisdictions undertaking high rates of testing. The national picture continues to be impacted by the current situation in Victoria, which has experienced the vast majority of recent cases, and to a lesser extent NSW.

Victoria is currently experiencing community transmission, with weekly case numbers over 3,000. There is a continued rise in cases in aged care residents and staff.

NSW is seeing a steady number of locally acquired cases; a small proportion of these cases are not linked with known local clusters or close contact of known cases, which may be suggestive of limited community transmission. The ACT Health Directorate continues to watch the case numbers closely in our neighbouring jurisdiction.

Public Health Directions

The Chief Health Officer has issued Public Health Directions to restrict the movement of people to reduce the risk of importation and transmission of the virus across borders.

Since the border restrictions with Victoria were implemented, the ACT Health Directorate has received more than 2,700 exemption applications to enter the ACT. There are currently around 380 people in quarantine (people returning from Victoria and overseas, as well as close contacts of confirmed cases) with support provided by ACT Health Directorate and compliance and monitoring being managed by ACT Policing.

On 7 August 2020, the NSW Government introduced restrictions to people entering NSW from Victoria. All NSW residents returning from Victoria may only arrive via Sydney airport and are now required to spend 14 days in hotel quarantine directly after arriving at Sydney airport.

This decision has impacted a number of ACT residents that had been already been approved to return to the ACT in their private vehicle, as NSW has cancelled transit permits for ACT residents, preventing them from crossing the border into NSW to drive home.

The situation at the NSW/Victoria border has been challenging for residents with existing ACT exemptions. The ACT Government worked closely with the NSW Government to develop an arrangement that would help these people to return home. This arrangement was confirmed by the NSW Government on 12 August and will enable ACT residents to drive from Wodonga to the ACT during the day only, from 13 to 17 August.

ACT residents planning to return from Victoria must notify ACT Health of their travel plans at least 72 hours in advance, and they will be required to quarantine on arrival for 14 days. After 17 August, the only options for ACT residents will be to fly back to Canberra Airport or to fly to Sydney and undertake hotel quarantine there.

The ACT Government is strongly advising ACT residents not to travel into Victoria other than for absolutely essential reasons. Residents are asked to please contact ACT Health Directorate should an emergency situation necessitate travel to Victoria to advise of your travel dates. This situation is rapidly evolving, and we cannot give any guarantee about conditions of travel imposed by other jurisdictions.

Since the implementation of the ACT/Victoria border restrictions on 3 July 2020, ACT Health staff members have met all passengers arriving at Canberra Airport from Melbourne. Our staff collect all passenger details for those who have travelled from Melbourne and ensure that they have the appropriate permit or exemption to enter or transit to NSW or Queensland. Transit passenger information is also provided to travellers from both NSW and Queensland for any passenger transiting through Canberra airport from Melbourne.

As of 8 August 2020, Queensland borders were also closed to NSW and the ACT, except by way of exemption.

The ACT Government is monitoring the situation across our borders and updating advice as the situation develops to protect the health and wellbeing of the community.

At this time, Canberrans are strongly advised against travel to the greater Sydney area or Newcastle. In addition, anyone who has recently visited locations identified by NSW Health as having cases of COVID-19 must follow the advice being provided by the NSW authorities.

The Government has also advised workers in high-risk settings who have recently been to the greater Sydney area or Newcastle, that they should not attend work or visit these settings for a period of 14 days after leaving those areas.

This advice extends to all staff, volunteers and visitors in high-risk settings, specifically hospitals, residential aged care facilities, correctional facilities and residential accommodation facilities that support people who require frequent, close personal care and who are vulnerable to severe disease.

Workers, volunteers and visitors in these settings are also asked to be alert for COVID-19 symptoms such as a fever and dry cough, and if symptoms develop, please immediately self-isolate at home and arrange to get tested.

People who work in other health settings, such as General Practitioners and other community health practitioners, can continue to deliver services. However, they should remain vigilant, and if symptoms develop, should self-isolate and get tested.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the situation in NSW and provide further advice to the community as needed.

Canberra' Recovery Plan - Step 3.1

As the ACT is in a good position, the Chief Health Officer advised the Government that some minor and cautious changes could be made to assist a small number of businesses and activities to recommence under strict COVIDSafe guidelines.

Step 3.1 of Canberra's Recovery Plan commenced at 9:00am on 10 August 2020. This change allows for the opening of food courts for dine-in, casinos and gaming in clubs, steam-based services and adult services. There was also some easing of restrictions in other settings, such as spectators at community sport activities, group bookings at bars, clubs and pubs, and the number of patrons at gym and health club facilities when unstaffed.

For further details of the changes to restrictions that came into effect on 10 August, visit: www.covid19.act.gov.au/what-you-can-do/faqs-changes-to-restrictions.

The Government recognises that ACT residents may be feeling anxious at this time given the situation in neighbouring states. The ACT Government's priority is protecting Canberrans and our most vulnerable community members from the potential spread of COVID-19 into the Territory.

The situation is being closely monitored and all actions taken by the ACT Government are carefully considered to protect our community. The Chief Health Officer remains confident that the ACT is in a very good position to respond should any new cases emerge.

Our public health specialists are working closely with stakeholders to support and build the capability of the residential aged care sector to prepare for and respond to a COVID-19 outbreak.

The ACT Health Directorate is also working collaboratively with the Commonwealth Government in support of actions to increase responsiveness and preparedness in aged care settings.

Next steps

Canberra's Recovery Plan is focused on minimising risk as restrictions are eased and putting in place appropriate measures to manage these risks as best as possible.

To achieve this, the community needs to continue to follow the public health advice and stay aware of the latest updates.

Canberrans who are currently working from home are encouraged to continue to do so if this works for them and their employer. Those Canberrans who cannot work from home, are reminded to continue to maintain physical distancing where possible and practice good hand and respiratory hygiene.

It is also important to remember that employees who are sick must not attend their workplace. They must stay at home and away from others and get tested if they experience symptoms of COVID-19.

All Canberrans are encouraged to regularly visit the ACT COVID-19 website at www.covid19.act.gov.au.

(ENDS)