

2021

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

**Chief Health Officer Report on the Status of the Public Health Emergency due to COVID-19
Report 10 – 14 January 2021**

**Presented by
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Minister for Health
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CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 14 JANUARY 2021

Declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT

A public health emergency declaration is in force in the ACT due to the public health risk of COVID-19 to the ACT community. As Chief Health Officer, I make a recommendation to the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration remain in place at this time due to the ongoing public health risk COVID-19 presents.

The public health emergency declaration enables me, as Chief Health Officer, to take necessary actions to reduce threats to public health, including issuing public health directions that aim to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our community. These directions include the requirement for returned travellers to undertake hotel quarantine and for confirmed cases of COVID-19 to self-isolate.

The ACT's public health response is guided by the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and National Cabinet.

National situational update¹

As at 14 January 2021, there have been a total of 28,650 cases of COVID-19 in Australia and 909 deaths. The majority of cases reported nationally in the past fortnight were overseas acquired and diagnosed in hotel quarantine. In the last seven days there have been 92 cases overseas notified and 19 locally acquired cases of COVID-19. There are currently an estimated 296 active cases in Australia.

Over the past week, there has been an average of 16 new cases reported each day. Of the newly reported cases, the majority have been from New South Wales.

The overall proportion of cases under investigation in each state and territory is relatively low, indicating that public health actions, including case identification and contact tracing, is occurring in a timely manner.

To date, more than 12,209,377 tests have been conducted nationally. Of those tests conducted, 0.2% have been positive.

NSW situation

In NSW, 48 locally acquired cases have been reported over the past 14 days, with 6 of these cases being from an unknown source. There are currently two genomic strains of COVID-19 in circulation in NSW. The Northern Beaches, Croydon and Wollongong clusters are all the same genomic strain. The Berala cluster is a separate genomic strain. The cases associated with these clusters have resulted in NSW introducing restrictions since late December 2020, including temporary 'stay at home' orders for the Northern Beaches LGA.

In response to these clusters and the NSW public health orders, the ACT government issued a Public Health Direction requiring anyone in the ACT who had been in the COVID-19 affected areas of Greater Sydney, Central Coast and Wollongong to quarantine for 14 days after last being in the area. Non-ACT residents were required to have an exemption prior to entering the ACT and local residents were asked to complete a self-declaration.

¹ Coronavirus (COVID-19) at a glance – 14 January 2021, Australian Government Department of Health, accessed 14 January 2021

This direction was amended on 12 January 2021 and the COVID-19 affected areas in NSW were reduced to 11 LGAs. These LGAs represent the Northern Beaches area and certain areas of the Western and South-Western Sydney region, which present the highest risk of COVID-19 transmission. Approximately 1,800 people left quarantine as a result of this change.

Queensland situation

In Queensland in early January 2021, a COVID-19 variant of concern was identified in a Hotel Grand Chancellor quarantine staff member. This led to a 3-day lockdown of the Greater Brisbane area. As a result, the ACT Government amended the previously described Public Health Direction to include the Greater Brisbane area. This required anyone in the ACT who had been in Greater Brisbane from the 2 January 2021, to quarantine for 14 days. Non-ACT residents were required to have an exemption prior to entering the ACT and local residents had to complete a self-declaration. Greater Brisbane was removed from the direction as a COVID-19 affected area on 11 January 2021 and approximately 5,000 people were released from quarantine.

ACT situational update

There have been no new cases reported in the ACT in the past 14 days. One new case has been reported in the ACT in the past month. The positive case was a Commonwealth Government official who returned from overseas and entered quarantine. The individual underwent a routine day 12 test which returned a positive result on 20 December 2020 and remained in quarantine with support from ACT Health until cleared of infection.

There are currently no active cases in the ACT and there is no evidence of community transmission at this time. A total of 115 cases have recovered, and sadly there were three deaths early in the pandemic.

As at 14 January 2021, there are 810 persons in quarantine in the ACT. With travel restrictions and quarantine requirements in place for both NSW and Queensland, at the peak on Monday 11 January 2021 there were over 7,780 people in quarantine in the ACT.

Supporting this significant increase in persons in quarantine required a joined up effort from across the ACT Government, with support provided by ACT Policing and volunteers from the Rural Fire Service and ACT Emergency Services Agency.

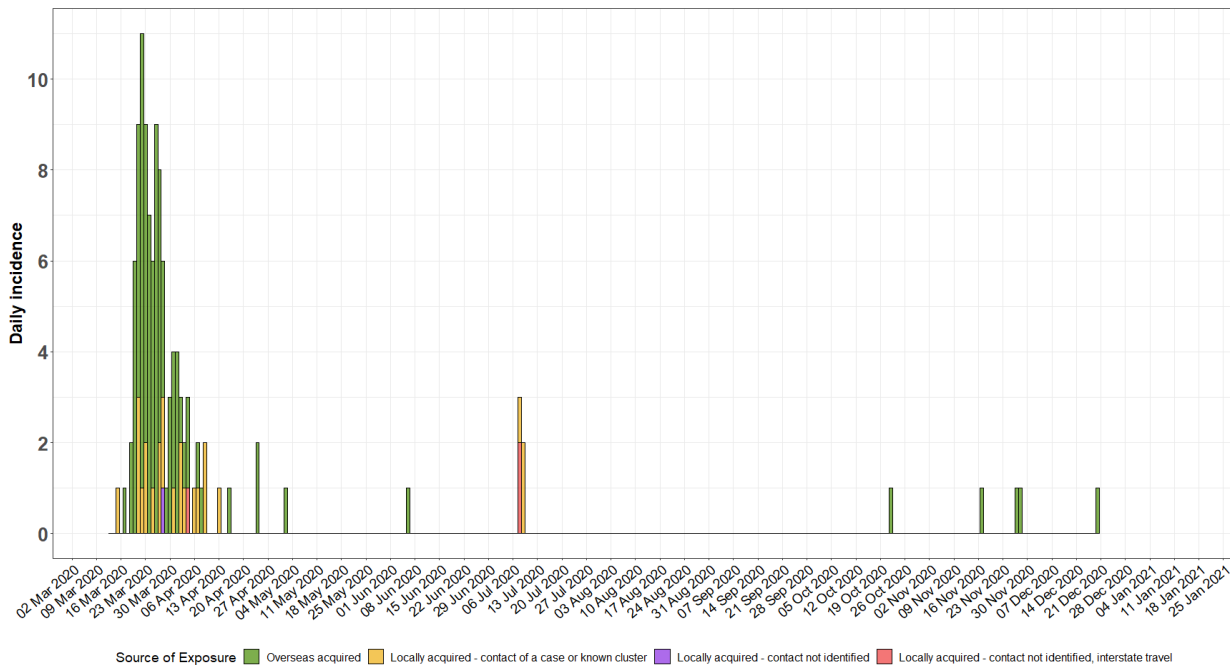
ACT Policing is actively enforcing public health directions using a multi-pronged approach which includes at-home quarantine checks, vehicle checks at the ACT/NSW border, and 'pop-up, RBT-style' stations at locations across the ACT.

ACT Policing has conducted approximately 1,500 home compliance checks weekly. In addition to these checks, as at 12 January 2021, police have conducted 29,546 vehicle checks (including checks conducted at the ACT/NSW border, and 'pop-up' stations). As a result of these checks, 219 vehicles have been turned around, while 438 returning ACT residents have been directed into quarantine.

To date, ACT Policing has issued six criminal infringements (fines to three businesses and three individuals), 15 cautions, and made one arrest for breaches of COVID-19 Public Health Directions. The rate of compliance across the ACT has been high throughout the pandemic, and the Canberra community has been receptive to COVID-19 restrictions and directions.

ACT Policing will continue to conduct COVID-19 compliance activities including checking of individuals subject to current directions such as mandatory quarantine.

Confirmed ACT COVID-19 cases by date of notification



Global situational update

Globally, as of 14 January 2021, there have been more than 90 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than 1.95 million deaths, reported to the World Health Organization. Many areas of the world continue to experience a strong resurgence in cases, and have introduced or reintroduced lockdown measures and other restrictions. A number of countries such as South Korea and Japan which had previously controlled the spread of the virus have recently experiencing a new peak in cases.

Most of the new cases over the past 14 days have been reported in the Americas (50 per cent), followed by European Region (37 per cent). By country, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Brazil reported the most cases over the past 14 days.

In recent weeks, virus strain variants have been detected in the United Kingdom and South Africa. While evidence is still emerging, current indications are that these strains appear to be more highly transmissible.

The ACT community's response

The efforts of the ACT community, including businesses, have been vital in slowing the spread of COVID-19. The continuation of these efforts, including following the public health advice and public health directions, is critical to control the spread of COVID-19 in the ACT. Businesses are asked to follow their COVID Safety Plans to support the safety of the community and their staff. All members of the community are also being reminded to:

- maintain physical distancing and avoid large gatherings
- practice good hand and respiratory hygiene
- stay home if unwell, and
- get tested if experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms.

Compliance inspections continue to find good compliance overall with current public health directions, noting some issues among some businesses, namely keeping COVID Safety Plans up-to-date and maintaining current occupancy limits.

Surveillance and monitoring

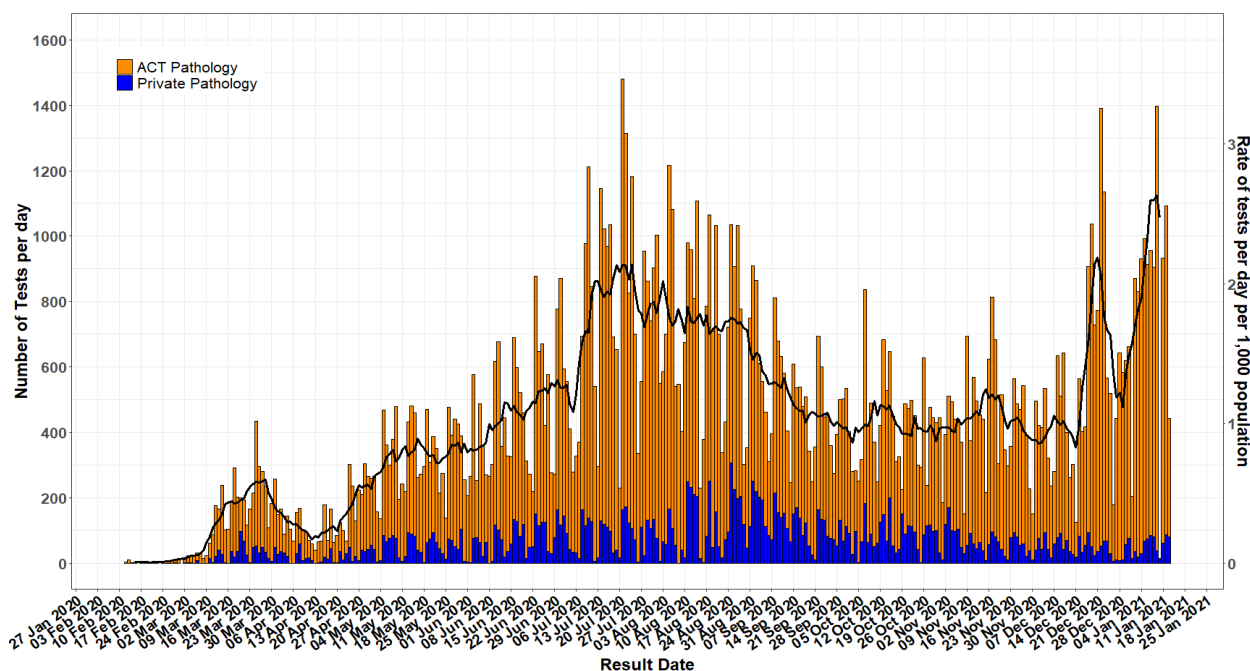
Testing numbers in the ACT are currently very strong. In late December and early January testing numbers rose well above previous averages. Canberrans responded to the public health advice to come forward for testing if they had visited confirmed COVID-19 case locations or were directed to get tested by ACT Health or another jurisdictional public health department.

The number of tests undertaken in the past 14 days is greater than the previous 14 days, with the testing rate being above 2 tests per 1,000 population for the first time since early August 2020. Although rates of testing have increased in both sexes and the age groups, there has only been a marginal increase in the testing rate since December 2020 in people aged 0-17 years. Broken down by sex, the testing rate in males in this age group has remained steady since December 2020.

Of the increased number of tests conducted in the past fortnight, there have been no confirmed cases and there is no new evidence of community transmission which is testament to Canberrans doing the right thing and following public health advice including notifying ACT Health before returning from a COVID affected area, and quarantining and getting tested if required.

It remains essential that Canberrans present for testing if experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms, no matter how mild. Continued high rates of testing are essential to maintain rigorous surveillance, closely monitor the situation and act quickly if a case is detected or new cases emerge in other jurisdictions.

All COVID-19 tests for ACT Residents in the ACT by result date: all laboratories



Wastewater testing

To strengthen our surveillance, the ACT has joined the NSW Health Wastewater COVID Surveillance Programme. For several months, a wastewater sample has been collected weekly from the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Plant, which receives wastewater from over 99 per cent of the ACT population. Since the start of December 2020, the sampling strategy has been strengthened to additionally include sampling from 5 sites across the ACT, with catchment areas ranging from approximately 40,000 people to approximately 100,000 people.

Wastewater samples to date have not detected any trace of COVID-19. ACT Health will continue to monitor these samples.

Easing of restrictions

The ACT currently remains at Stage 4 easing of restrictions. The impact of easing restrictions is being closely monitored to inform future decisions. Fortnightly public health risk assessments continue, informed by monitoring the impacts of eased restrictions.

Exemptions were issued to some cinemas to temporarily increase capacity from 65 to 75 per cent over the Christmas and New Year period, where venues are using the Check In CBR app for contact tracing purposes. As of mid-January the ACT surpassed over 5,000 venue registrations and over 230,000 downloads of the Check In CBR app.

Further easing of restrictions will be considered as the local and regional situation is assessed following the summer holidays which has seen an increased movement of people around the country.

Conclusion

The recent situation in NSW and Queensland is a reminder of just how quickly the COVID situation can change and of why we must continue to be alert to the possibility of new cases emerging in our community, particularly as there can be a risk of travellers returning to Canberra carrying the infection from COVID-19 affected areas.

We are at a stage of the pandemic where the ACT and most parts of Australia continue to do well compared to many other parts of the world, but new and potentially more transmissible variants of the disease now emerging, must be studied and understood to determine the most effective strategy of response. The ACT is working closely with the Commonwealth Government and all jurisdictions to ensure our quarantine system is robust and that we have appropriate infection prevention control measures to reduce the risk of introduction of these strains of the disease into Australian communities.

The COVID-19 vaccine rollout is anticipated to commence in February 2021 and the ACT is well placed to soon commence the vaccination program in Canberra. ACT Health is working closely with the Commonwealth Department of Health to guide the implementation of our vaccine program. The aim is to deliver a safe, efficient and targeted vaccination program for Canberrans, and keep the community well informed about the program.

The situation across the world is a reminder that the pandemic is far from over and the risk of new cases emerging remains high. AHPPC advises that Australia will continue to see cases and periodic outbreaks. The ACT is focusing on maintaining robust risk mitigation measures, continuing enhanced surveillance in the community and outbreak planning for at-risk settings.

The ACT's focus is early detection of cases; preparedness to thoroughly investigate cases, clusters and outbreaks and ensure our workforce is equipped to surge when required; and public messaging to community and businesses around the importance of continuing to practise COVID safe behaviours. The community's continued adherence to health advice and public health directions remains critical to control the spread of COVID-19 in the ACT.

Recommendation

As Chief Health Officer, I advise the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration should remain in place until 17 February 2021 due to the public health risk posed by COVID-19. It is necessary to maintain public health control measures to safeguard against a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the ACT. All Australian jurisdictions are maintaining public health emergency status or similar at this time and continuing to focus on suppression of COVID-19.