

2020

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

**CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH
EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19**

24 JULY 2020

**Presented by
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
Minister for Health
30 July 2020**

Minister for Health

Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH
EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 24 JULY 2020

Dear Minister

Please find herein my report to you, as Minister for Health, in relation to the declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT due to COVID-19.

Section 119 (4B) of the *Public Health Act 1997* provides that if the “COVID-19 declaration has been extended or further extended under subsection (4), the chief health officer must advise the Minister at least every 30 days about—

- (a) the status of the emergency; and
- (b) whether the chief health officer considers the declaration is still justified.”

Minister, my advice is that COVID-19 continues to pose a public health risk to the ACT community. My recommendation to you, as of 24 July 2020, is that the public health emergency declaration in the ACT should remain in place until 21 August 2020 to enable sufficient measures to continue to limit the spread and risk of COVID-19 to the community. This is particularly important due to the heightened risk of community transmission at this time.

Australian jurisdictions are maintaining public health emergency status or similar at this time and continue to focus on the suppression of COVID-19.

Yours sincerely



Dr Kerry Coleman

Chief Health Officer

24 July 2020

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 24 JULY 2020

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. This declaration currently remains in place until 21 August 2020, subject to ongoing review. It enables the Chief Health Officer to take the 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.

On 26 June 2020 the acting Chief Health Officer made recommendation to the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration be extended for a further 45 days due to the ongoing risk of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases.

The ACT's public health response continues to be guided by the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee and National Cabinet. National and Territory restrictions have included the closure of Australia's border to non-residents, mandatory 14-day quarantine of persons returning from overseas travel, restrictions on domestic travel, restrictions on public and private gatherings and closure of non-essential businesses and services.

National situational update

As at 22 July 2020, there have been a total of 12,428 COVID-19 cases in Australia and 126 deaths (an increase of 2,066 cases in the last week). Cases continue to be detected in other jurisdictions, predominantly in Victoria and NSW. Of note, 98 per cent of cases reported nationally in the last week were locally acquired within Australia (i.e. not diagnosed in hotel quarantine).

Victoria continues to report large numbers of cases with no known source of exposure, indicating community transmission; currently there are 1,074 Victorian cases with no known source of exposure.

At this stage, almost all locally acquired NSW cases are linked to known clusters, which indicates that there is no or limited community transmission. However, ACT Health Directorate continues to watch the case numbers closely in our neighbouring jurisdiction.

Several venues associated with NSW clusters serve as a reminder of the risks that particular venues pose with easing of restrictions because of a high throughput of people and infection control challenges posed by many frequent touchpoints. These include pubs, gyms and places of worship. Additionally, issues that have been identified in some of these venues include not enforcing physical distancing/density restrictions and not maintaining visitor registers.

Ongoing messaging to the community around continuing to practise physical distancing and good hygiene, the importance of businesses adhering to COVID safety plans, and isolating and getting tested if unwell, is critical at this stage of the epidemic.

ACT situational update

There have been no COVID-19 cases notified in the ACT for 13 days. There is currently one active case in the ACT. Since the acting Chief Health Officer's last report to the Minister for Health on 26 June 2020, the ACT recorded an additional five COVID-19 cases between 8 to 10 July 2020. All five cases were linked to a person returning to the ACT who had been in a Melbourne "hotspot". Contact tracers quickly followed up the close contacts of these cases and appropriate actions were rapidly put in place to minimise any further risk to the ACT community.

The ACT implemented border restrictions with Victoria on 8 July 2020. These measures currently prohibit travel from Victoria to the ACT unless an exemption is granted by the ACT Government. Persons in the ACT who have been at certain NSW locations in Batemans Bay and South Western Sydney at particular times must quarantine in the ACT for 14 days after leaving that location.

ACT Health Directorate has received more than 1300 exemption applications to enter the ACT and are currently managing 567 people in quarantine (people returning from Victoria, overseas and certain New South Wales locations, as well as close contacts of confirmed cases). Quarantine compliance is being monitored by ACT Policing. It is too early to tell whether more cases will be diagnosed in the several hundred people currently in quarantine in the ACT.

Global situational update

The rate of cases and fatalities continue to accelerate in many regions of the world, with the World Health Organisation reporting a total of more than 15 million cases worldwide and almost 620,000 deaths.

COVID-19 confirmed cases	Global ¹	Australia ²	ACT ³
Total confirmed	15,012,731	13,306	113
Total recovered	Not reported	8,775	109
Total deaths	619,150	133	3

1. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200723-covid-19-sitrep-185.pdf?sfvrsn=9395b7bf_2 [access date 24 July 2020, data from 10:00 CEST, 23 July 2020]
2. <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers-at-a-glance> [access date 24 July 2020, data from 23 July 2020]
3. <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/> [access date 24 July 2020, data from 09:00am 24 July 2020]

The ACT community's response

The Canberra community has played a vital role in slowing the spread of COVID-19 by following health advice and complying with public health directions. Businesses have been engaged and innovative in working to ensure the safety of staff and customers. Businesses are being asked to follow their COVID Safety Plans to support the safety of the community and their staff, and to ensure the ACT continues its suppression of COVID-19. All members of the community are being reminded to:

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

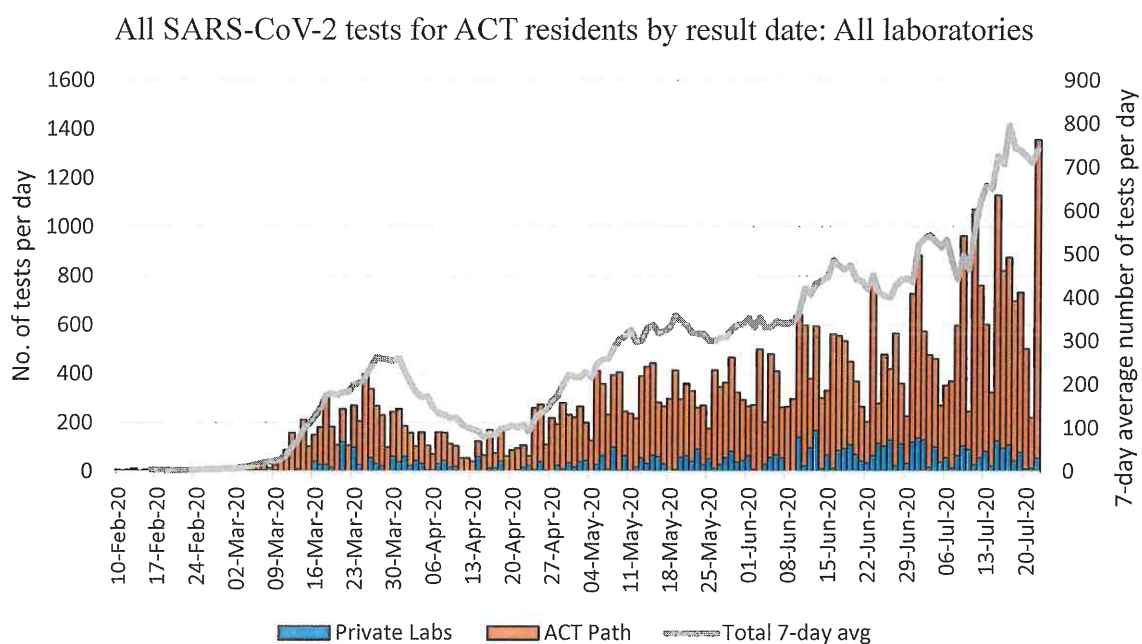
These behaviours represent the new norm, rather than a return to pre-COVID state. It is vitally important that the community continues these behaviours to suppress the virus in the months ahead.

Surveillance and monitoring

Testing in the ACT has continued to increase in recent weeks with a doubling of the number of people tested in the last fortnight to the previous fortnight. This is due to many ACT residents being identified as contacts of cases and clusters in NSW.

As at 9:00am on 24 July 2020, the ACT had conducted over 46,215 tests (positive and negative). Due to the recent increase in demand for COVID-19 testing, two additional testing clinics have been opened in West Belconnen and Garran. An additional drive-through facility similar to the drive through testing facility at EPIC, will be opened soon in south Canberra.

The risk of undetected COVID-19 cases in the ACT is considered to be low; however, it is essential to maintain rigorous surveillance and closely monitor the situation as restrictions are eased.



Easing of restrictions

The recent outbreaks in Victoria and now NSW have slowed the easing of restrictions across Australia. The decision to progress to Stage 3 easing of restrictions (as per the ACT's Recovery Plan) was paused on 9 July 2020 to assess how Victoria and NSW's community transmission will impact the ACT and the rest of the country. Limited changes to restrictions were made from 17 July to enable community sports competition and competition and squad swimming to recommence with no limit on swimmers per lane.

Easing restrictions leads to a higher risk of resurgence of COVID-19. The impact of easing restrictions on COVID-19 case numbers in the ACT, as well as the impact of changes made in other jurisdictions, is being closely monitored to inform future decisions on easing restrictions. As public health control measures are gradually eased, public health experts are monitoring and assessing the impact of each step.

The community is being reminded to be cautious, continue to practice COVID safe behaviours and get tested if experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms.

Conclusion

Recent COVID-19 outbreaks in Victoria and NSW are a reminder that the pandemic is not over and that we will continue to see cases and periodic outbreaks. The ACT is focusing on implementing risk mitigation measures in response to the outbreaks and continuing enhanced surveillance in the community and outbreak planning for at-risk settings.

The ACT has paused the move to Stage 3 easing of restrictions and is monitoring for evidence of community transmission. The experience of a growing number of countries around the world, and in some Australian jurisdictions, demonstrates the risk of outbreaks or resurgence in cases as restrictions are lifted, due to factors such as increased social mixing. Our focus is therefore on early detection of cases; preparedness to thoroughly investigate cases, clusters and outbreaks; 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 as of 24 July 2020 the public health emergency declaration should remain in place in the ACT until 21 August 2020. It remains 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.