Australian Government
Department of Health

AUSTRALIAN HEALTH SECTOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN FOR NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

SHORT FORM

Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Short Form

Introduction

The Australian Government is responding strongly to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. This response is being guided by the Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19 Plan) www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/australian-health-sector-emergency-response-plan-for-novel-coronavirus-covid-19. The COVID-19 Plan is designed to support and help coordinate government health agencies.

All Australians have a major stake in managing this outbreak and can contribute significantly to reducing the impact of COVID-19. This document – COVID-19 Short form – outlines how key activities will operate and how the public can support the response. It outlines:

- what we know about the disease and the outbreak;
- what sort of risk COVID-19 represents;
- what the Australian Government health sector will be doing to respond;
- how the Government's response will affect people;
- what people can do to contribute; and
- how people can manage their own risk, the risk to their families and their communities.

Aim of the Australian Government health response

The Australian Government response to COVID-19 is intended to:

- minimise the number of people who become infected or sick with COVID-19;
- minimise how sick these people become and how many people die;
- reduce the burden on our health systems, so that they can continue to provide the regular health care Australians may need; and
- help Australians to reduce their own risk and the risk to their families and communities.

The disease

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by a new type of coronavirus – severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). There are many types of coronavirus, which can cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to pneumonia. People with COVID-19 were first reported in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, in China. The disease has since spread widely around the world, including to Australia.

As COVID-19 is a new disease, there is still much we do not know, however our understanding is growing daily and we are refining our response regularly as new information comes in.

You should keep an eye on the Government health websites, as changes will be made periodically to what the Government is doing, how health services are operating, and how you can best participate and protect yourself (for example www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov).

Based on our current information, the key characteristics of the disease are:

Symptoms	Fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue, and shortness of breath
Spread	The virus can spread from person to person through close contact with an infectious person, contact with their droplets from a cough or sneeze, or contact with surfaces (e.g. doorknobs or tables) contaminated by droplets.
Prevention	Everyone should practise good hygiene to protect against infections. Wash your hands with soap and water. Use a tissue and cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Avoid close contact with others.
Diagnosis	If you become unwell, seek urgent medical attention. Call ahead of time to book an appointment and tell your doctor if you have been in close contact with someone who has been ill or have travelled recently.
Treatment	There is no specific treatment for COVID-19, but medical care can help with the symptoms.
Vaccination	Scientists from around the world are working on developing a vaccine. The World Health Organization (WHO) believes this may be available within 18 months.

Risk

Some people who get COVID-19 will have a mild illness and recover quickly. Some people will get sick very quickly. A small number will develop complications that require hospital care (most commonly pneumonia) and a small proportion of these may die.

At present, the people who appear to be most likely to experience severe disease are the elderly and people with other existing diseases, such as diabetes, heart and lung disease, and cancer.

International travellers may have come into contact with COVID-19 in another country. Go to www.health.gov.au/covid19-travellers for the current list of higher risk countries.

Impact

We are still learning about COVID-19, so it is difficult to estimate the impact it will have. However, respiratory diseases can spread quickly and as COVID-19 is a new disease there is no existing immunity in our population. This means it is possible that it could spread widely, quickly and any one of us could get it.

Although there is a lot of research going on, no specific medication or vaccine is available for COVID-19 yet.

Proportionate response

As we learn more about the disease and how it behaves in our population, we will regularly review our approach. The level of risk may vary across different groups and we want to be able to protect people who are most vulnerable. Regular review will allow us to move resources into supporting activities that are working well and allow us to scale back or turn off things that are not. In this way, we can make the best use of our resources and minimise the disruption to people's daily lives.

Who is managing the response?

In Australia, state and territory governments have primary responsibility for health matters. When a major health issue faces our country, state and territory governments work together with the Australian Government. They share information to provide the best possible care, move resources to where they are needed, and ensure the approach is consistent and integrated across our country. The key committee used to coordinate this and make key decisions is the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC).

AHPPC is made up of the Chief Health Officers of each state and territory, the Australian Government's Chief Medical Officer and representatives from other key departments. It is meeting daily to assess the risk to Australia, recommend public health actions, and provide national leadership to inform the response.

Though the COVID-19 Plan is focused on government activities, many agencies (government and private) are working to support the health response and to ensure Australians continue to have access to essential services.

Are we prepared?

Australians are very lucky. We have an excellent health care system. Communicable diseases are managed every day and a lot of preparation has gone into how we manage a major incident like a pandemic. Though COVID-19 is a new disease, there are many similarities with influenza, so existing influenza strategies are being applied to the current situation. Where the characteristics of COVID-19 require different treatment, our strategies are being adapted to be most effective.

What is the Government doing?

Stages

Different stages of a pandemic have different needs and priorities. Our plans are therefore divided into different stages.

Initial action

The Australian Government response has been progressing through the 'Initial Action' stage. 'Action' means that we are actively managing cases in Australia. 'Initial' describes what we are doing when we are still learning about the disease. During 'Initial Action', we have been applying strategies that we know work for most communicable diseases so we could start quickly and still be effective in our response.

In the **Initial Action stage,** we have implemented activities to:

Focus area	Examples of activities
Minimise the spread of the disease into and across Australia	• Entry refused to direct flights from Hubei Province, China • Health checks on people arriving at Australia's international borders from countries considered to be high risk • Fact sheets (www.health.gov.au/covid19-resources) provided to incoming travellers encouraging them to visit a doctor as soon as possible if they develop symptoms of COVID-19 • Information provided for all Australians to raise awareness of COVID-19 symptoms and what to do if you get them • People with COVID-19 symptoms and people who have been in close contact with them isolated
Prepare the health system for increased numbers of patients	• Strategies developed and started to increase the number of health care staff available (e.g. identify nurses who have previously worked in Intensive Care Units (ICU) who can return to this priority area) • Certain clinics designated as specialising in COVID-19 and patients channelled from Emergency Departments (EDs) to these clinics
Manage initial cases	• Guidance developed for health professionals to help them provide best practice care • Action taken to ensure each state and territory has the capacity to do laboratory testing to confirm whether someone has COVID-19 • People contacted, who may have been exposed to people confirmed as having COVID-19
Learn more about the virus and how it behaves in our community	• COVID-19 added to the national disease tracking database so cases are reported • Numbers of cases in Australia and overseas analysed to identify trends and an overall picture • Details of cases in Australia analysed, such as severity of disease, travel history, transmission to people who have been in close contact etc. to understand how the disease behaves in the Australian context
Provide information to people in the health care system to help them give best practice care	• Information from the WHO and other experts shared • Public health guidelines developed and published • Fact sheets provided for general practitioners, EDs, pathology providers and health care managers • Information provided to confirm the best methods of infection control (e.g. masks, gowns, gloves)
Provide information to people in our community to help them manage their own risk of exposure	• Travel advisories provided on the Smartraveller website (www.smarttraveller.gov.au/) • Regular media updates provided about where the outbreak is spreading and which are high risk locations • Information provided on good hygiene behaviour • Fact sheets provided which are tailored to specific needs, such as aged care residents and families, schools, employers, the hotel and transport industry

Targeted action

On 15 March 2020 the Prime Minister announced that we had moved into the 'Targeted Action' stage. Although we are still learning about how the disease behaves in the Australian context, we now know enough about the disease to more closely tailor what we are doing to respond.

Many activities we started in Initial action will continue, but our increased knowledge is allowing us to refine some to improve how well they work, cancel others which are not helping and begin new activities that we have seen are needed. We will continue this refinement throughout the response. This will increase the effectiveness of our activities and make more efficient use of our resources.

In addition to Initial action activities, in the **Targeted Action stage** we will **consider** activities to:

Focus area	**Possible activities**
Support and maintain quality care	• Move resources (staff and equipment) within hospitals to priority areas • Adapt hospital resources (rooms, protocols/guidelines, equipment) for use in priority areas, such as ICU • Consider cancelling elective surgeries to free up capacity in public hospitals • Where possible, support mildly ill people to be cared for at home, to leave hospital places for severe cases • Consider changing ratios of nurses to patients in hospitals • Take measures to limit the exposure of people in higher risk groups to COVID-19 (e.g. limit access to aged care facilities) • Provide additional support to remote and rural communities (including remote and rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities) if needed • Limit the exposure (e.g. in waiting rooms) to people suspected of having COVID-19 by having GP clinics which specialise in COVID-19
Provide information to people in the community to help manage risk of exposure, reduce spread and receive medical help early (if needed).	• Continue to provide up-to-date information about the spread of the disease in Australia and overseas • Provide information and specific planning to support groups of the community at higher risk of severe illness • Provide options for people to obtain medical advice without meeting in person (e.g. telehealth)

Standdown

As we are able to wind down our response, we will move to the 'Standdown' stage as we return to normal services. After 'Standdown,' we will return to 'Preparedness' so that we can monitor for any future major outbreaks.

What does this mean for you?

- Direct flights or passengers from high risk areas may be refused entry
- Travellers may be asked to stay home and isolate themselves on return to Australia
- People confirmed as having COVID-19 and people who have been in close contact with them may be asked to stay home (or in hospital if they need that level of care)
- Hospitals may change the way their services operate to minimise the exposure of health care workers and other patients to people who have COVID-19, and conserve their resources, such as
    - directing people with COVID-19 to specialised clinics; and
    - cancelling elective surgeries
- GPs may change the way their services operate to minimise the exposure of health care workers and other patients, and conserve resources, such as
    - designating certain GP practices as specialising in COVID-19
- There may be different ways to seek health care and information, such as health information lines
- Demand on health services is likely to be high, so be prepared for waiting times to increase
- You may be asked to stay home from work or school
- You may be asked not to visit aged care facilities
- You may be discouraged from going to large events

(Specific information about measures is available on the Health website at www.health.gov.au).

What can you do?

You can make a big contribution to the response to COVID-19. Here are some things you can do:

- **Keep informed**
  Keep an eye on information about COVID-19 and if changes of behaviour are requested, do your best to follow them. Keep in mind that not all sources of information are as reliable as others. Choose carefully where you get your information from. State and territory government websites (https://health.govcms.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/local-state-and-territory-health-departments) and the Australian Government Health website (http://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert) are reliable sources of information

- **Keep in touch**
  You should keep in touch with friends and family, to make sure they are well, but you may need to use different methods to do this to avoid exposing them or yourself to the disease if one of you is sick (e.g. phone, text, electronic media)

- **Stay home if sick**
  You can reduce or slow the spread of the disease by staying home if you are sick and not passing on infection to others

- **Self isolate**
  You should consider staying home, even if you are not sick, if you think you may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 (e.g. if you have just returned from travelling overseas or been in contact with someone who is unwell)

- **Use good hygiene behaviour**
  If you are sick, using good hygiene practices like coughing or sneezing into your elbow and regularly washing your hands can reduce spread of the disease

- **Be a smart traveller**
  If you are planning to travel, check on the level of COVID-19 disease in that country and consider whether travel is currently recommended. Visit the Smartraveller website (www.smarttraveller.gov.au/)

- **Get your flu shot**
  It is possible to get COVID-19 and influenza at the same time. This can make people very ill. Although there is currently no COVID-19 vaccine, there is a flu vaccine. Get yours!

Your patience and understanding of the increasing pressure the health system may be under will also be very much appreciated.

Where can I get more information?

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to www.health.gov.au.
Call the National Coronavirus Health Information Line on 1800 020 080. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you require translating or interpreting services, call 131 450.
The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available at www.health.gov.au/state-territory-contacts.

If you have concerns about your health, speak to your doctor.

www.health.gov.au