

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 Communique – 31 March 2020

In early March the Australian Government convened the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 (the taskforce) to develop and deliver a **National Management Plan** to protect communities and save lives.

The taskforce is co-chaired by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) and the Department of Health. It includes leaders from NACCHO and their affiliates, Aboriginal Health Services, state and territory public health representatives, the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association and the National Indigenous Australian's Agency (NIAA) as well as Public Health Medical Officers (PHMOs) and communicable disease experts. The taskforce has been meeting twice a week, with out-of-session issues discussed and addressed daily.

The determined and coordinated effort by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector has meant that the National Management Plan will support the delivery of health care that is locally-led, holistic, comprehensive, and culturally safe to the community, during the Coronavirus pandemic.

A four-phase plan to protect communities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians over the age of 50 and those with a chronic condition are considered to be among the group of Australians most at risk of Coronavirus. **The National Management Plan** adopts COVID-19 responses already underway in Australia, but with specific operational guidance and tailoring relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and how the health sector can best respond in an effective and culturally safe way. The Plan acknowledges that remote communities face additional challenges in responding to Coronavirus.

The four phases of the National Management Plan include:

- **Phase 1: Preparedness:** The taskforce has been engaging with stakeholders to ensure culturally safe and consistent advice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by developing the guiding principles, context, key issues and targeted action for planning, response and management for Coronavirus. Targeted communication resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been developed and can be found on [the Department of Health website](#).
- **Phase 2: Suspected or initial cases:** Building on the preparedness phase, the taskforce has developed advice on a range of actions to prevent sustained community transmission.
- **Phase 3: Outbreak situations:** Delivering an effective response to outbreaks in communities will require an increased response, including the potential deployment of mobile respiratory clinics.
- **Phase 4: Stand-down and evaluation:** When the threat of Coronavirus has reduced and risk to communities is lowered, the Australian Government will support communities in their recovery.

Lessons learned from this pandemic will be incorporated into future National Pandemic Planning.

This plan was endorsed by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) on Friday 27 March and came into effect on Tuesday 31 March 2020.

Additional action to further protect and support communities

The Australian and State and Territory Governments, working hand-in-hand with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, have put in place a number of other measures to help and support communities during the Coronavirus pandemic.

- ✓ **Minimising remote communities' exposure to Coronavirus:** In addition to the National Management Plan, the Government is working to minimise the exposure of Coronavirus to remote and very remote communities. Access to these communities has been restricted to protect community members from the spread of Coronavirus. Those returning to communities will be required to self-isolate for 14 days in line with health guidelines. Communities have taken their own action to restrict visitors to communities. All **non-essential visitors** to remote communities have ceased. Taskforce members are working with mining companies located in close proximity to communities to ensure there is minimal risk of transmission.
More: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/covid19-remote-communities>
- ✓ In the event of positive Coronavirus cases in remote communities, provisions have been made to **evacuate early cases** to enable an effective response and limit exposure to other community members.
- ✓ Working towards opening **GP-led respiratory** clinics to provide advice and health care to people with mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms while reducing the pressure on hospitals and the risk of transmission by visits to regular GP clinics. Sites for the respiratory clinics, which will include some Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS), are currently being determined and progressively rolled out.
- ✓ The Australian Government, working with Aboriginal and mainstream primary care services, is expanding **telehealth** (phone and video calls with your health care provider) to allow eligible patients to access both Coronavirus & ongoing care when they most need it and protect both patients and health care providers from the risk of infection.
- ✓ **Infectious Control eLearning** courses have been developed for workers in the health care sector and freely available to all with caring responsibilities. Specific resources for Aboriginal Health Workers, Practitioners, and specific settings such as remote communities are being developed. Access the training here: <https://covid-19training.gov.au/>
- ✓ **Community Clinic Preparedness:** All Aboriginal community clinics have heightened awareness of Coronavirus risk and many clinics across Australia are working in preparedness for Coronavirus. The Australian Government, working with NACCHO, is providing funding to Aboriginal

Community Controlled Health Services and local health clinics across 110 communities for preparedness activities.

- ✓ The taskforce continues to monitor the ongoing need for **personal protective equipment (PPE)** for clinicians working in communities across Australia. Taskforce members from the ACCHS sector provide strong advocacy on this issue, regularly reporting identified issues for action.
- ✓ Working to rapidly establish and increase our capacity to perform **quick testing in remote communities**.
- ✓ The taskforce meets with the Communicable Diseases Network and all other Government Agencies to ensure the strongest approach to protect communities.

More information can be found on the [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) health alert](#).

Messages to share

Keeping your Mob safe

Everybody is at risk of contracting COVID-19 so you need to protect yourself and others in your community. Especially elders.

We all need to work together to keep our communities safe and stop the spread of the virus. Government action alone is not enough.

As the Government is undertaking a broad range of actions to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, we can all act to protect and save lives by doing three simple things:

1. Staying healthy and strong with good hygiene

- Keep your hands clean. Wash your hands with soap and water (where possible) for at least 20 seconds after you cough or sneeze, go to the toilet, and before you make any food.
- Cough or sneeze into your arm or inside of elbow, not your hands.
- Put your tissues in the bin after you use them and wash your hands after.
- Don't touch your face.
- Clean surfaces often, such as door handles, kitchen and bathroom.
- Don't hug or shake hands with people.
- If you are sick with a fever, cough or sore throat and feel tired or are having trouble breathing, keep away from people and family in the community and seek medical help.

2. Protecting your communities and Elders

- Don't travel to places in your community, or other communities, unless you have to.
- Stay at home and away from other people as much as you can. If you are around people, try to stay two metres away from them. That's two big steps.
- If you use medication, make sure keep taking it to stay as healthy as possible.
- Don't share cups or water bottles
- Don't smoke or share smokes with other people.
- Get a flu shot and protect yourself and your family from the flu too.

3. Staying connected

- It's important we stay connected with family, friends and community.
- Call people for a yarn on the phone.
- Talk about the community and check if they are OK.
- Talk about the virus and how to stop the spread.
- Connect to family and friends on social media.
- Share your tips on social media **#KeepOurMobSafe**

By taking action together we will slow the spread, take the pressure off our doctors and nurses and ultimately save lives – keeping your mob safe and well.

Where can I go for help?

Keep safe by knowing the symptoms of Coronavirus. The most common symptoms are fever, sore throat, cough, tiredness and difficulty breathing.

If you or are a family member are experiencing these symptoms, or you are concerned about their health, you can:

4. Call your local Aboriginal Medical Service, or someone you trust in the community if you feel unwell.
5. Call the 24-hour National COVID-19 Hotline can 1800 020 080.
6. Visit www.niaa.gov.au for information about remote community closures.
7. Check out the newest information on www.health.gov.au

Additional Resources

National resources:

Department of Health <https://www.health.gov.au/>

Australia.gov.au www.aus.gov.au

National Indigenous Australians Agency Coronavirus Information <https://www.niaa.gov.au/covid19-remote-communities>

Indigenous.gov.au <https://www.indigenous.gov.au/>

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation <https://www.naccho.org.au/>

NACCHO Coronavirus Information <https://www.naccho.org.au/home/aboriginal-health-alets-coronavirus-covid-19/>

State and Territory Resources:

Queensland

<https://www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19>

Consumers: <https://assetlibrary.health.qld.gov.au/share/9EDA794F-28B6-41E3-8F545AE24E6A30A6/>

Health care providers: <https://assetlibrary.health.qld.gov.au/share/F505EB63-5220-44A4-BA90E22602634213/>

Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council <https://www.gaihc.com.au/>

New South Wales:

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/covid-19-latest.aspx>

Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council <https://www.ahmrc.org.au/>

Victoria:

<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/victorian-public-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation <https://www.vaccho.org.au/>

Northern Territory:

<https://health.nt.gov.au/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-covid-19>

Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory <https://www.amsant.org.au/>

South Australia:

<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/health+topics/health+topics+a+-+z/novel+coronavirus>

Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia Ltd <https://ahcsa.org.au/>

Tasmania:

https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable_diseases_prevention_unit/infectious_diseases/coronavirus

Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc <https://tacinc.com.au/>

Western Australia:

<https://www.wa.gov.au/government/coronavirus-covid-19>

https://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus/Coronavirus-information-for-Aboriginal-people

Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia <https://www.ahcwa.org.au/>

Australian Capital Territory:

<https://health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/novel-coronavirus-covid-19>

Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service <https://www.winnunga.org.au/>