An open letter to those who’ve been vaccinated on what comes next - from Dr Tony Holohan, Chief Medical Officer

From Department of Health

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This pandemic has dealt each and every person in Ireland an unfair hand, in many different and diverse ways. Everyone has made difficult sacrifices; everyone has had one of the most uniquely challenging years of their lives. In that sense, we are all in this together.

However, there are some of us who were faced with more difficulties than others: firstly, those of you who have been bereaved by this disease and have experienced loss in a way that has been cruelly constrained by this disease and the restrictions it imposes on us. I would like to express my sincere condolences to each of you.

There are also those of you who at the outset were told you were medically vulnerable to the severe effects of this virus, either due to your underlying condition or your age. This pandemic has asked significant sacrifices from you and you have risen to this unprecedented challenge. By protecting yourselves and staying at home, you also undoubtedly helped to suppress this disease which protected other people and saved many lives.

Those of you who are at lower risk of the disease have also followed the public health advice to a very high standard to keep the spread of cases low and to get cases numbers back under control quickly when necessary.

We all know the impact that living life to the full - in terms of socialising, exercise, family, work and travel - has on our physical and mental health. It is important to remember that basic individual behaviours that protect us all, individually and as a community, remain the most important and effective contribution that we can all make to preventing transmission of the disease, even when vaccinated.

These behaviours will continue to be a core feature of our ongoing response to COVID-19 as we begin to socialise more and look forward to seeing loved ones who we may not have seen for a very long time.

The COVID-19 Vaccination Programme offers great hope. Vaccination has enabled those most at risk to regain many freedoms that were taken from you by this virus. As more people are vaccinated, we are in a position to recommend some increases in lower risk social opportunities including family visits, personal services, non-essential retail and a return to religious services, in a safe and controlled manner.
Those of you who are vaccinated thus far are mostly those we recommended to cocoon at the outset of the pandemic. You can now get back out there and restart many things you used to do, once restrictions ease from May 10th.

That might be visiting the seaside, a trip to a museum, a visit with a friend, or a trip to see your grandchildren at long last. It’s important that you look out for the public health advice that is relevant to you and to plan to do it safely – but it’s important to get on and do it!

I know that those of you who remained indoors, cut social contacts and continue to do everything to protect yourself from COVID-19 may be anxious at the idea of re-opening your social circle, even in a safe and controlled way and even though you have been vaccinated.

While this anxiety is understandable, you can have confidence in your vaccine, no matter which one you received. And you can have confidence that the simple measures we recommend really do help to reduce your risk of picking up this disease.

A way to help manage anxiety is to plan your trip including what transport you will use, ensure you have a mask and hand sanitiser available to you, leave yourself additional time so you can avoid crowds, practise social distancing and make your way to and from your destination safely and comfortably.

Risk assess your choices and your environments – if you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, feel empowered to walk away and come back another time. Encourage loved ones to feel similarly about prioritising their own safety.

For many people, the last year will not have allowed you to be as active as you were previously. This has likely negatively impacted on mobility and fitness, as well as on confidence. It is important to be aware of this and give your body time to readjust to being more active.

Now is the time to move forward, to go outdoors and to see one another again. As spring turns to summer, we should all take advantage of the bright evenings and warmer weather. Exercising outdoors is an important tool to protect our mental and physical health.

This is not a signal that the pandemic is over. We have all come a long way and things will improve further but there remains a risk that too much social mixing especially indoors, in houses and other settings will lead to a further surge of this disease. It is important that we keep up compliance with the restrictions and the public health advice.

The more we do so the more we can avoid a dangerous surge in cases, which would require us to slow down the progress of easing of measures that is planned for the coming weeks and months.