

Briefing on Government measures in response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 24 March

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Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

Over the last few days and weeks we have seen daily case numbers stagnate, at a level higher than we would like. We know that there have been days over the last week or two when we have all groaned at daily numbers seemingly stuck at around 500 or higher. This can be very disheartening for so many of us who are continuing to abide by the public health guidance and do the right thing.

However, we have to remember how far we have come and how much we have achieved. Most of us are doing the right thing. The new and now predominant variant is much harder to control, much harder to stop spreading. This is what we are seeing in the levelling off in case numbers.

What is concerning is that there has been a 9% increase week on week in case numbers, the first increase since the peak of the third wave. 13 counties now have community positivity rates of more than 10%. Rates are higher now on a number of measures compared to where we were at other points including just before Christmas.

As part of the HSE's enhanced COVID-19 testing for local communities, five new 'walk-in, no appointment necessary' temporary testing centres are being established to actively look for cases of COVID-19. These will be in areas where the number of positive cases are particularly high. Increasing the number of people we test will help us better understand how and why the virus is spreading quicker in certain areas. Around 1 in 5 people have COVID-19 without having any symptoms. Testing people with no symptoms will help us find positive cases earlier and allow these people take the necessary action to protect others. This will help us break chains of transmission.

The vaccination programme is rolling out, and we will continue to get vaccines to people as quickly as possible. We must all hold firm for a little longer – to give the vaccination programme a chance to reach more people in order for us to see the real benefits it can offer in our fight against this disease.

I know this seems like the most frustrating time but in many ways it is also the riskiest moment - when we are rolling out vaccines but not quite out of danger, when we have been in Level 5 for a long time and just want to be out of it, and especially want to start visiting our friends and families again.

Social Activity Measure

On Friday, we will be publishing Wave 4 of SAM (Social Activity Measure) – the study we are running in collaboration with the ESRI. Initial results from wave 4 confirm what we all know – that we are fed up, but most of us are complying with the restrictions and public health guidance despite that.

One of the things that the study looks at it is home visits. We know many people have good reasons for visiting another's home – for care and support including childcare, for help with shopping or medicine or maybe they are part of your bubble. But we are seeing an increase in people making social visits to other homes and to receive visitors to their homes. We're are not necessarily talking about house parties, but we are talking about some home visits that are lasting an hour or more where masks are not being worn. It may be just a cup of coffee with extended family or a quick lunch. With the new variant, this is just a lot riskier than people may think. We are well used to hearing now that all social contact is risky, but this is especially the case if that contact is indoors, if rooms are not well ventilated, if you are not wearing a mask and the visit goes on too long. So, where you have choices about non-essential visits, think again and don't give COVID the opportunity it will surely take.

We are all finding this hard, we are all struggling. Sometimes it is hard to remember what our priorities are – protecting our most vulnerable, protecting our health service, keeping our children and young people in school – making sure everyone in our community gets the opportunity to get vaccinated and avoiding a damaging 4th wave of the disease.

Next week, ahead of April 5th, Government will consider the next stage of action and will make an announcement setting out the next steps on this journey. In the meantime, we must stay the course – for our families and friends, our communities, our frontline workers and for each other.

Nursing Home Visits

In perhaps one of the first signals that we have brighter days ahead, this week we have the very welcome, albeit cautious and gradual, return of visits to long term residential care facilities and nursing homes. This is one of the first practical benefits of the vaccine programme.

Residents can receive two visits per week. These visits will be permitted on general compassionate grounds where a facility has a high level of vaccinations. And we know this is very welcome news for residents and their families. Level 5 restrictions introduced at the start of the year have been challenging for everyone but for residents and families of those in residential facilities, it has been particularly difficult.

Visitors will have to wear masks or PPE and book their visits in advance but will be able to enjoy the company of their loved ones after a very difficult few months.

Mandatory Quarantining

Yesterday, mandatory hotel quarantine was introduced as another element of Ireland's public health measures to curb the transmission of COVID-19. Mandatory hotel quarantine is required for passengers who have been in a list of designated states, including those who have transited through a port or airport in a designated state, even if they stay airside or portside, in the 14 days prior to their arrival in Ireland.

Passengers will be required to complete 14 days of mandatory hotel quarantine at a designated facility, this could be reduced if a passenger receives a not-detected result of a COVID test that is taken after ten days. It may also be extended if a passenger tests positive during their stay.

People must also enter mandatory hotel quarantine if they do not provide evidence that they have a negative or 'not detected' result from a COVID-19 (PCR) test carried out no more than 72 hours prior to arrival into Ireland.

Before travelling to Ireland, people must reserve and pay for a place in mandatory hotel quarantine.

If you fall into the category of traveller required to quarantine on arrival, it is an offence if you travel without making the booking in advance. You can reserve a place in a mandatory hotel quarantine and read the full list of countries deemed high risk at www.gov.ie/quarantine.

Resumption of Education

In the last three weeks, we have had the welcome return to in classroom learning for so many of our young people. Special schools are back to 100% capacity and all primary students are back in the school building. This is in addition to the return to the classroom for our fifth and final year leaving certificate students.

From next Monday 29th March, early learning and care and school age childcare will resume. It is then planned that remaining post-primary school students will return on 12th April, after the Easter break.

We now want to ensure these school buildings can stay open and we can stay on track with our plan for reopening. It is therefore very important that we don't see the gradual re-opening of schools over this month as a signal that other forms of interaction are appropriate. Continue to exercise caution when dropping children to and from school. Don't arrange playdates or congregate in school grounds catching up with other parents you may not have seen for a while. We must ensure that the virus does not have an opportunity to spread in these settings.

Mobility and Compliance

I've already highlighted that with schools reopening and a spell of good weather, we are seeing a lot more people moving around. Overall traffic volumes are continuing their upward trend, up 18% on last month. While retail and recreation mobility fell marginally in the last week after several weeks of persistent increases this may be due to the effect of St Patrick's Day. But, the number of people attending workplaces is rising again, with around a 12% increase on last month.

While your family life may be getting back to normal with returns to school and childcare, please remember, the current default position is to work from home. Your employer should be facilitating this if your physical presence is not essential in the workplace. Maybe you think it doesn't matter a lot but every additional contact counts – even more so with the new variant so it is worth the collective effort in reducing overall risk.

What is very concerning at this point in our fight against COVID is that An Garda Síochána are continuing to see people gathering in groups at home and organising get togethers around social occasions. As I have said already, indoor and crowded settings facilitate this highly transmissible virus to spread. Such gatherings put at risk not only those attending, but everyone they come into contact with afterwards, including loved ones, neighbours, colleagues and your local community. To date, over 15,350 fines have been issued for breaches of COVID-19 restrictions, over 2,300 were for organising and attending house parties.

The Basics

Despite our weariness and perhaps feeling demotivated because of the lack of progress and that we are a bit stuck on numbers. We do know what works. We just have to stick at it. COVID doesn't get tired or demotivated. To use a football analogy, the new variant has given it "fresh legs" for this next phase of the match.

So,

- Stay at home unless absolutely necessary
- If you need to go out for an essential purpose, wear a mask, both in indoor and busy outdoor settings such as playgrounds, parks and supermarket queues

- Keep your distance – stay 2m away from others
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water, use alcohol-based sanitiser where hand washing isn't possible
- Stay within your 5km unless it is for an essential purpose
- Continue to work from home where possible.
- If you are in an indoor setting, make sure it is well-ventilated, keep windows open and try to think about refreshing the air regularly.

Updates - Supports

There continues to be a wide range of supports available to help employers and employees at this difficult time and they have all been extended to the 30th June.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

There are currently 49,100 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €2.4 billion in subsidies has been paid to 48,200 employers. An additional €408 million in employer PRSI has been forgone due to the reduced rate of PRSI on wages paid which are eligible for EWSS.

Covid Restrictions Support Scheme

In addition, to date 21,500 businesses have registered for Covid Restrictions Support Scheme with Revenue.

Pandemic Unemployment Payment

This week, the Department of Social Protection has issued weekly payments to approximately 449,500 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €141.88 million and marks a decrease of over 7000 on the number paid last week.

Since the last payment, almost 9,900 people closed their claim, with approximately 8500 of these stating that they were doing so because they are returning to work. The quickest way to make a claim for PUP or to close a claim is to do so online and to log on www.MyWelfare.ie.

Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment

I want to remind all workers again that when a worker is told to self-isolate or restrict movements by a doctor or the HSE due to them being a probable source of infection or has been diagnosed with COVID-19 by a doctor, they can apply for an Enhanced Illness Benefit payment of €350 per week. To be eligible for this payment a person must be confined to their home or a medical facility. Unlike the general Illness Benefit, there are no waiting days attached to this payment, so it is paid from day one of illness or self-isolation.

It is not necessary for a person with symptoms to leave their home to get a medical certificate from their doctor as all of the application process can be completed online via www.MyWelfare.ie. This week, just over 2,100 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

National Vaccination Strategy

So far, we have successfully rolled out the vaccine to 492,000 people, with almost 184,000 fully vaccinated having received two doses.

Close to 11,000 vaccinators have been trained while recruitment for vaccinators at 38 vaccination centres is well underway. The aim is for four in five adults to have received at least one dose by the end of June.

We are already seeing the positive impact of the vaccine roll-out on case numbers in the vaccinated population. Covid infection among the three groups which have been vaccinated – residents and staff in long term residential care, frontline healthcare workers and people aged over 85 – has halved, while cases in the community are down around 20%. And as previously noted, this week the vaccine programme is supporting the return of visits to nursing homes and long-term care facilities.

The status of the roll out of the vaccine to specific groups is as follows:

- Those aged 65 and up living in long-term residential facilities and staff is substantially complete
- Frontline healthcare workers are also very close to completion
- Over 85s have been completed and the process of vaccinating the 75-79 cohort is now underway. The target is to complete administration of vaccines for all aged over 70 by mid-May with full protection seven to 10 days afterwards. 88% of the deaths we have seen have been in this group.
- Vaccination of those aged 16-69 and at very high risk of severe COVID-19 disease will be rolled out further from this week.

Last week, the European Medicines Agency confirmed that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine in protecting from COVID-19 related serious illness and hospitalisation outweigh any risks associated with the vaccine, and that it is safe and effective. The HSE recommenced the administration of AstraZeneca over the weekend.

New US trial data published yesterday showed this vaccine was 100% effective at preventing people from falling seriously ill and 79% effective at stopping symptomatic Covid-19.

Safety is non-negotiable in our programme, and it is essential that reports of potential safety concerns, even if very rare, are rigorously and swiftly investigated so that the public can be reassured and if required, appropriate action can be taken.

For more information on The National Vaccination Strategy and the prioritisation list go to gov.ie

And, finally

I would like to finish today by again thanking you for all you are doing. We have come a long way but aren't yet where we need to be. We must continue to stay on the right path.

Trust in the public health advice. Think twice before deciding to take that trip, to go to that gathering or to venture outside your 5km. We know these measures work, they are working and if we can continue to persevere they will continue to work and we can begin a return to the normal we knew. We will get dividends from our efforts as more and more of us are vaccinated. We just aren't there yet.

Remember, 'Dá fhada an lá tagann an tráthnóna' no matter how long the day seems, evening will always come. So, no matter how difficult things seem right now, there are better and happier days ahead.

Stay safe.

Thank you