

Welcome

This bi-weekly newsletter is to ensure GPs and primary care providers are getting the latest information directly from the Federal Government. We appreciate the great work you are doing as part of our frontline in protecting and informing the community about COVID-19.

The situation is rapidly evolving and some information is location-specific so it is important to read each edition to be across all updates. Please directly share this newsletter with your team, colleagues and members to ensure rapid spread of essential information. To subscribe to this newsletter click [here](#).

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Current status

The international situation continues to rapidly evolve with more than 174,000 confirmed cases in more than 150 countries, many with sustained widespread community transmission.

In Australia, the number of cases is rising increasingly swiftly with a total number of confirmed cases as at 06:00 on 17 March 2020 of 375. However, the instances of community transmission remain minimal at this stage.

Social distancing

The Australian Government has taken the precautionary measure of recommending [public gatherings](#) involving more than 500 people be cancelled. At this stage, the cancellation does not extend to schools, universities, shops, supermarkets, public transport or airports.

In response to the significant spread of COVID-19 overseas the Australian Government also recently introduced [a requirement for any person arriving into Australia](#) from overseas to self-isolate for 14 days from the date of arrival.

Triage protocol

A national patient triage protocol is now available and can be found at the end of this newsletter. The protocol applies to the triage of patients at:

- public hospitals,
- respiratory clinics,
- their regular GP (including for telehealth), and
- the National Coronavirus Information and Triage line.

Testing Protocol

The current testing protocol is as follows. A test should only be administered if the patient:

- has returned from overseas in the past 14 days and developed respiratory illness with or without fever,
- been in close contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case in the past 14 days and developed respiratory illness with or without fever,
- has a severe community-acquired pneumonia and there is no clear cause, or
- is a healthcare worker who has direct patient contact and has a fever (≥ 37.5) AND acute respiratory infection (e.g. shortness of breath, cough, sore throat).

Requests for COVID-19 testing have increased dramatically over recent weeks and laboratory resources are under strain. The large number of tests being requested for people that do not have relevant travel history or that have not been in contact with a case is the most significant contributor to the large increase in testing and strain on laboratory consumables. As such, it is crucial that practitioners strictly adhere to the suspect case definition when ordering tests.

The Australian Government is working closely with laboratories through the Public Health Laboratory Network and with suppliers in order to secure supplies and explore potential alternative supply solutions to ensure that Australia maintains the capacity and capability to test for COVID-19.

Telehealth

The Government is continuing to respond to the evolving conditions making available more telehealth items available under the Medicare Benefits Scheme:

Since Friday 13 March 2020, the Department of Health has added 76 telehealth items to cover a range of services and providers, including GPs, midwives, mental health providers and specialists. From Monday 16 March new changes include:

- Updates specific to GP and Other Medical Practitioner items will make patient eligibility more practical. Specifically, the requirement for patients to have had services from their 'usual GP' has been expanded to include where there has been a face to face attendance in the previous 12 months with the practitioner or at the practice.
- The 'need for a limited examination' has also been removed from the GP and Other Medical Practitioner item descriptions.

MBS online will continue to update as new items are added so practitioners are encouraged to regularly visit the [MBS online website](#).

National COVID-19 hotline

The national COVID-19 hotline is available 24/7 on 1800 020 080.

Callers are directed through to two streams, dependent on whether they self-identify as having symptoms/are sick, are a health professional or require general information. These streams are answered by clinical and non-clinical staff respectively.

The clinical team is experiencing high demand, with most questions answered with publically and readily available information. The most common questions are:



If your patients require general advice then direct them to the [Health Department Website](#) which will continually be updated with the best and latest information.

eLearning: Infectious control training

The Health Department has developed the [Infectious Control Training module](#) to provide care workers across all sectors including health, aged care and disability with infection prevention and control (IPC) for COVID-19. It includes information on:

- COVID-19 – what is it and who is most at risk?
- Signs and symptoms to look out for
- Keeping safe – protecting yourself and others
- Myth-busting

The module is designed for the whole workforce, whether working in health facilities or in people's homes, to provide a baseline of information for the critical work you are doing at the frontline inpatient care.

At the end of the module (which should take no longer than 30 mins) there is a short quiz for you to self-test your knowledge.

In the first 24 hrs, more than 3,500 health care workers have completed this important training and it is essential that all workers in health care practices enroll in the module as soon as possible.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) update

A total of 1.2 million surgical and P2 masks have been distributed to primary health networks (PHNs) to provide to GP's, health workers and pharmacists. An additional 586,000 have been made available for PHNs with distribution commencing today.

If you feel you have a demonstrated need for PPE, please contact your PHN to request access to this supply. The Australian Government is continuing to look at further ways to ensure the national stockpile can cater to the increasing PPE demand as the COVID-19 outbreak

National public Health Campaign

The Government's 'Help Stop the Spread' public health campaign launched last Friday - and a number of resources are now [available for download](#) including videos, posters and radio ads.

A comprehensive \$30 million national advertising campaign is part of the Australian Government's broader COVID-19 national communication plan designed to ensure timely, factual and consistent information. It will run across all media platforms from now until the end of the year and is translated into more than 20 languages.

Please take the time to download the posters to display in your office, and share videos across your social media channels to ensure patients in your clinic have been made aware of the best strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their local community.

More information

There is a collection of resources for the general public, health professionals and industry about COVID-19 on the [Department of Health website](#).



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