

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride**



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

HSS(MD) 38/2020

FOR ACTION

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Dear Colleague

**COVID-19 CONTACT TRACING STRATEGY AND PROGRAMME IN NORTHERN
IRELAND - 'TEST, TRACE AND PROTECT'**

I write to update you that the Department has published the strategy for contact tracing for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland- '*Test, Trace and Protect*' Strategy. The strategy sets out our public health approach to containing and controlling COVID-19 and to reducing transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the community in Northern Ireland. This strategy and our newly established contact tracing service are central to ensuring that we interrupt and reduce transmission of SARS-CoV-2, and that we maintain the value of R below 1 as we move into the next and subsequent phases of our pandemic response.

The *Test, Trace and Protect* Strategy is available on the Department's website at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-test-trace-isolate-support-strategy>. The key elements of the strategy are the rapid identification and proactive testing of all people with symptoms of COVID-19, effective contact tracing of people who have been in close contact with cases, and the provision of support to enable contacts of cases to self-isolate for the required period of time.

I am writing to ask for your help in communicating the following important messages to patients and/or symptomatic individuals to whom you provide care -

(1) Any individual who develop symptoms of COVID-19 should be advised to self-isolate and book a test as soon as possible

The expanded case definition for COVID-19 now includes:

a new continuous cough OR fever OR a loss or changed sense of normal smell or taste (anosmia).

This updated case definition is as outlined in my earlier correspondence <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/HSS%28MD%29-35-2020.pdf>

Everyone over five years of age in Northern Ireland with symptoms of COVID-19 is now eligible for testing. Testing is offered through the National Testing Programme and symptomatic members of the public can book their own test via this weblink www.nhs.uk/ask-for-a-coronavirus-test. Alternatively, symptomatic members of the public can book a test by calling the free phone number 119.

People booking a test can choose to be tested at one of four drive through test centres in Belfast, Derry, Craigavon or Enniskillen – these centres are operating as part of the National Testing Programme. Symptomatic members of the public can also book a test via the above weblink to order a postal self-test kit which will be dispatched to their home.

The results of testing undertaken through the National Testing Programme are emailed or texted directly to the person who has been tested. Arrangements are currently being worked on to make these test results available via the NIECR.

The symptomatic individual and all members of their household must continue to self-isolate, unless the symptomatic individual receives a negative test result.

(2) The NI Contact Tracing Service located in the Public Health Agency will be in touch with all cases of COVID-19

It is important that you advise symptomatic individuals who are being tested for COVID-19 that the Northern Ireland Contact Tracing Service will be in touch with them. The symptomatic individual will need to share information about their recent interactions. This could include household members, people they have been in direct contact with, or within 2 metres for more than 15 minutes. People identified as close contacts will be informed that they have been in contact with a case and they will be advised of what actions they need to take.

All information discussed with the Contact Tracing Service will be handled with appropriate privacy and confidentiality safeguards. The telephone number used by the service currently comes up as a 'withheld number' on receiving telephones, so it would be most helpful if you could alert all/any symptomatic individuals you are in contact with that they should expect a call from the Contact Tracing Service if they have a positive test result. We are working to implement a technological solution so that calls from the Contact Tracing Service to cases and their close contacts will have an identifier, and we will update in due course.

(3) Advice relating to isolation requirements will be provided and support will be signposted

Individuals who develop symptoms (cases) should self-isolate for 7 days from onset of symptoms. They can complete their period of isolation at the end of 7 days if they are clinically improved and have had 48 hours without a temperature.

People identified as having been in close contact with a case (contacts) should self-isolate for 14 days from the time of their last contact with the symptomatic individual, even if they do not have symptoms. This is in order to stop potential inadvertent transmission of the virus. Close contacts do not need to be tested unless they develop symptoms. **It is very important that the full period of 14 days isolation is observed by close contacts.**

If necessary, the Contact Tracing Service will offer signposting to relevant support services that may be required to help people to self-isolate. Contacts who are advised to self-isolate will be able to avail of statutory sick pay. Guidance for employers will be issued in due course.

In Summary

Contact tracing and isolation of cases and their close contacts is one of the most important interventions we will undertake to minimise transmission of COVID-19, and in turn this will help us to protect our population and our health and social care system over the coming weeks and months. It is important to encourage all symptomatic individuals and their close contacts to participate in our contact tracing system and to adhere to all advice and guidance the service will provide.

It is important to highlight that our testing and contract tracing programmes will continue to operate alongside with the full suite of public health measures currently in place to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in NI. All members of the public must continue to adhere to social distancing requirements and they must also continue to practice good hand and respiratory hygiene at all times.

I would once again like to thank you for your hard work and dedication in these unprecedented times, and to call on you to support our '*Test, Trace and Protect*' Strategy which is of crucial importance as we move into the next phase of tackling COVID-19.

Yours sincerely



DR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer

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Trade Union Side

This letter is available on the Department of Health website at
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/professional-medical-and-environmental-health-advice/hssmd-letters-and-urgent-communications>