

Fact sheet – New Zealand’s planning to manage COVID-19 during the summer

Background

- Since March 2020 New Zealand has strengthened and evolved its ability to respond to COVID-19 outbreaks. Improved testing and contact tracing capacity have meant since the August resurgence in Auckland, we have successfully responded to four further outbreaks without having to move any part of the country to new alert levels.
- The summer holiday period poses unique challenges to responding to an outbreak of COVID-19. Large numbers of people will be travelling for holidays or seasonal work, there are more social gatherings and large events such as festivals – and, like other Kiwis, there will be health system workers taking well-deserved leave.
- Cabinet recently considered planning for responding to outbreaks of COVID-19, building on lessons from the August resurgence in Auckland, and with a particular focus on managing risk and challenges during the summer holiday period.

REDUCE – how everyone can help keep New Zealand safe over summer

- The fundamentals of how we would respond to COVID-19 during summer remain the same – test, trace and isolate. However, people need to continue to do their bit and take responsibility for reducing risk. That’s why the Government has launched a public information campaign ‘Make Summer Unstoppable’ to ensure New Zealanders understand their role as we head into our first summer with COVID-19.
- The simple behaviours still apply. People should wash their hands and scan the NZ COVID tracer app wherever they can. And importantly, if people are sick with COVID-19 symptoms, they should stay home and get a test. These behaviours are supported by the ‘Make Summer Unstoppable’ campaign.
- We’ve also added Bluetooth functionality to the NZ COVID Tracer app – people should enable this but still scan QR codes. Using the app regularly will increase the likelihood that the Ministry can reach people if they have had contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.
- Additionally, it is important that people are prepared for their holiday plans to change and to have extra supplies (e.g. face coverings, soap, hand sanitiser, food and medication).

READY – the tools we have and measures we’ve put in place

- The summer planning approach supports New Zealand’s elimination strategy to keep COVID-19 out. If we find it, we will stamp it out. To support the public health response, the Government has developed a framework for a nationally-led, regionally-delivered response to any outbreak. This covers arrangements for governance and decision-making, how communities will be supported and public communications and intelligence gathering processes.

- The fundamentals of achieving the elimination strategy are rapid case investigation, testing, and self-isolation. We do this through controlling entry and surveillance testing at the border, physical distancing and hygiene measures, testing for and tracing all potential cases, and isolating cases and their close contacts.
- We also have broader public health controls that could be used in the event of a larger outbreak such as mandatory face coverings where physical distancing isn't possible – and as a last resort, Alert Level changes.
- Important in our careful consideration of how a response would be implemented over the summer holiday period is the readiness of the health system – particularly in parts of the country that will see large numbers of visitors.
- Working with DHBs and PHUs, the Ministry of Health have confirmed there is a national surge team that can support contact tracing efforts at a local level in the event of an outbreak.
- The Ministry of Health and DHBs have rosters for on-duty staff including Medical Officers of Health, and the NZ Defence Force and Police are ready to deploy staff to support a response as required. DHBs and PHUs also have arrangements to support each other in the event of an outbreak in a particular district. Laboratory testing capacity has also been confirmed. Healthline will continue its usual level of service.
- The Government has been working with major event organisers and has agreed a voluntary code outlining how to safely deliver events by reducing COVID-19 risks and support contact tracing if needed. PHUs are also working directly with these organisers to support them to deliver their events safely.
- Of course, there is always the possibility that a natural disaster could happen at the same time we are dealing with an outbreak – and we've planned for this. The National Emergency Management Agency and regional Civil Defence Emergency Management systems will be operating as usual and have plans to handle concurrent events if needed.
- People in remote locations where there is limited cell phone coverage would very likely be safe from exposure to COVID-19, but would need to follow public health advice upon return from those locations – this is a personal responsibility.

RESPOND – how we would respond to an outbreak

- If a positive case was identified in the community, the usual approach to communicating with the public would be used – updates and advice would be provided by the Minister of COVID-19 Response and/or the Director-General of Health or his delegate.
- The specific response to an outbreak would depend on the details of the situation and the public health advice. Officials have considered the various scenarios that could emerge and the range of responses that might be appropriate.
- In the event of an outbreak in a summer context such as a campsite or festival, people in that area would need to initially stay where they are and in their bubble

while the situation is assessed. This would allow more information to be gathered and official public health advice developed. This would apply unless people are advised otherwise by the Government that they need to leave urgently for public safety reasons.

- Longer term, it is unlikely the area would be locked down given many people potentially exposed to the virus would have left and travelled elsewhere. Initially the focus would be on contact tracing, testing and self-isolation of contacts of known cases.
- After the initial assessment, in a worst-case scenario, if it became clear there was a high risk of widespread transmission, people would likely be asked to return home. Consideration would be given to moving New Zealand (or large parts of it) to Alert Level 3 and requiring people to go home, and not travel once home, to limit the risk of transmission.
- It is important to remember that this is a worst-case scenario. After a long, hard year, we all deserve to enjoy our summer – including those who are working hard through the holidays to keep us safe. Let's thank them and make our summer unstoppable by each and every one of us doing our bit to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- In addition to washing hands, scanning QR codes, sneezing and coughing into elbows and importantly, staying home when sick – we should also think about what happens if we're travelling away from home and have to stay longer or quickly return home in the event of an outbreak. Having individual plans is important.