

BY EMAIL

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For action

- HSC Trusts Medical Directors
- HSC Trusts Directors of Nursing
- GP Medical Advisers, All General Practitioners and GP locums (*for onward distribution to practice staff*)
- OOHs Medical Managers (*for onward distribution to staff*)
- RQIA (*for onward distribution to independent sector health and social care providers*)

29th February 2024

Dear Colleagues,

UPDATED COVID-19 TESTING GUIDANCE EFFECTIVE FROM 29 FEBRUARY 2024

Further to correspondence issued today from the Chief Medical Officer [Letters and urgent communications 2024 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#) advising that all circulars in relation to COVID-19 testing have been stood down with immediate effect, the purpose of this letter is to set out updated guidance for health and social care settings.

While COVID-19 continues to circulate in Northern Ireland, the burden of disease is much less thanks to the success of the vaccination programme, high levels of population immunity and the availability of effective treatments for those at most risk of serious disease should they become infected.

It is now appropriate that the guidance on COVID-19 testing in health and social care is updated. Testing for COVID-19 is now recommended:

- To inform clinical management of a patient.
- To investigate and manage incidents and/or outbreaks; or
- To protect extremely vulnerable settings and to enable cohorting and appropriate infection prevention and control (IPC) measures.

Improving Your Health and Wellbeing



As such, the previously issued HSS(MD) Circulars relating to COVID-19 testing have been withdrawn^{i, ii & iii}.

1. Testing for symptomatic health and social care staff

COVID-19 testing of symptomatic staff across health and social care settings, including hospitals, primary care, community, care homes and hospices, is no longer required. Staff who are unwell with respiratory symptoms who are unfit to perform their usual duties should contact their line manager and follow usual sickness and absence processes. Routine COVID-19 testing of staff with respiratory symptoms is no longer required.

The above advice applies to all health and social care settings with the following exceptions:

- Symptomatic staff working on hospital wards focused on treating profoundly immunocompromised patients (e.g. transplant and haematology wards); these symptomatic staff must remain very diligent about staying away from work when symptomatic and should be advised to test by Lateral Flow Device (LFD) and follow normal sick absence policy (*test to protect extremely vulnerable settings*).
- Symptomatic health and social care staff who may themselves be eligible for COVID-19 treatments, should test in line with extant COVID-19 testing advice for individuals who are at highest risk. [Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\) | nidirect](#) (*test to inform clinical management*).

2. Clinical Pathways

Routine COVID-19 testing of asymptomatic patients is no longer required. This includes the following:

- Routine COVID-19 testing of asymptomatic patients who are being discharged from a hospital to a care home/hospice or other residential setting is no longer required.
- Routine COVID-19 testing of immunosuppressed and asymptomatic oncology, haematology and transplant patients who are unscheduled admissions to hospital is no longer required. HSC Trusts continue to have clinical discretion with regard to COVID-19 testing of these patients, with the decision to test based on clinical assessment and a dynamic risk assessment.

COVID testing should continue in those patients who are suspected of having the infection and who are eligible for COVID treatments. Testing should focus on supporting clinical diagnosis and management. Clinical teams should use their discretion in relation to the testing required for any individual patient.

Individuals who are eligible for COVID-19 treatments can continue to access these through pharmacy collect. Further information is available at the following link:

[Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\) | nidirect](#)

3. Testing of symptomatic carers including family carers

In line with the updated approach to testing, COVID-19 testing of symptomatic family and informal carers who provides close personal care for someone who is at higher risk if they contract COVID-19 is no longer required.

4. Access to LFTs

- The OLT channel closes on 29th February 2024. From this date, care homes, primary care and independent health practitioners who require testing will be able to access LFD tests via the Pharmacy Collect scheme, which is operational in the majority of pharmacies.
- Ordering arrangements for HSC Trusts remain unchanged. Trusts can continue to access these via BSO.

I would like to thank you and your staff for all the work, for their ongoing commitment and dedication to providing the very best care possible.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Joanne McClean
Director of Public Health



Mrs Heather Reid
Director of Nursing, Midwifery & AHPs

Guidance that has been withdrawn

ⁱ • [HSS MD 17/2022](#) dated 4 May 2022: Updated COVID testing and isolation guidance for health and care workers and guidance on visitor testing;

ⁱⁱ • [HSS MD 50/2022](#) dated 8 November 2022: Updated COVID-19 testing guidance to support clinical pathways

iii [HSS MD 18/2023 dated 27 March 2022: Updated COVID-19 testing guidance to support clinical pathways](#)