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What is contact tracing?

Contact tracing is an established method to help prevent the further spread of infections such as COVID-19, and we are now using this approach to target potential clusters which could spark new outbreaks.

How does contact tracing work?

Contact tracing works by identifying a confirmed case and asking them who they have been in contact with. Individual contacts are identified as being high risk, low risk or no risk. To be considered high risk you will have to have been in close contact with a confirmed case and have spent more than 15 minutes with them without any personal protection. This means that those who have casually passed by someone on the street will not be considered high risk. Contacts may also be people who have had the infection but were unaware of this because their symptoms were mild and they may have unwittingly spread infection. The person with a confirmed infection, and their 'high risk' contacts will be given advice on what to do about managing symptoms and of the need to self-isolate to prevent any wider spread of the virus.

What happens if I'm identified as a close contact of a confirmed case?

As a close contact you will be asked to self-isolate for up to 14 days, depending on when you last came into contact with the person. It's really important to do this even if you don't feel unwell.

You will also be asked to continue to self-isolate if you have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case **even if you have received a negative test result**, because it can take up to 14 days for the symptoms of infection to develop.

This will be crucial to avoid you unknowingly spreading the virus to others. If you have no symptoms, your household doesn't need to self-isolate with you, but they must take extra care to follow the guidance on social distancing, hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene.

Is contact tracing effective?

Contact tracing is an established public health measure for the control of infections such as COVID-19. If we know who the contacts of COVID-19 cases are it makes it possible to quickly find other people who may have become infected and we can then stop any further spread of the infection. Contact tracing has been a key part of the response in several countries that have successfully reduced case numbers.

Contact tracing in practice

How will the Contact Tracing Service contact people?

If you receive a positive test result you will be contacted by the PHA's Contact Tracing Service in the first instance by text message, asking you to enter your close contacts online using the HSCNI 'Help us trace your contacts' service. This is so we can warn your close contacts as quickly as possible that they might have become infected and give them guidance.

We may call (from (028) 9536 8888) those who do not wish to use the web service or those who cannot use the service for other reasons.

If you have been identified as close contact you will receive a text message from 'HSCtracing' instructing you to self-isolate. You should follow this advice immediately and follow through until the end of the 14 day period.

Why I have received a text message from 'HSCtracing' asking me to self-isolate?

If you receive a text message from 'HSCtracing' you should immediately self-isolate. This is a new service which means that as soon as someone's details are added to the contact tracing service system, they'll get a text message advising them to self-isolate.

What if the person who tests positive doesn't have the details of a contact?

In the vast majority of cases, the positive case will have a landline, mobile or email address for their close contacts. In some instances they won't, for example if they have come into contact with someone on public transport, which is where a proximity app will complement the contact tracing service.

What arrangements do you have for people who don't speak English as a first language?

We can utilise the HSC translation service.

What about people who may not wish to engage with the service, or indeed may not have a phone, for example people with undetermined residency status?

We understand that some people will have very good reasons for not engaging with us – even though we only use this information for health protection and ultimately to help protect others. We aim to work with trusted partners to help us explain the importance of the contract tracing service to break the chains of infection of the disease.

Will children be contacted directly, or through their parents?

Children will generally not be contacted directly – the information will be sought from their parents/ legal guardians.

What if someone hasn't capacity to self-isolate – will a next-of-kin be contacted and what impact does this have on the individual's privacy?

If someone has a named individual responsible for their care, they will be engaged as would normally be the case with regard to medical treatments and advice.

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If you ring a landline, anyone could pick up – does that breach the contact's privacy if you have to ask for them?

Identifying ourselves as being from the PHA and asking to speak to a contact is not, in itself, a breach of privacy. This happens with other bodies such as banks or GP practices who ring a landline.

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Are HSC workers going to be contact traced?

Yes, arrangements are in place in HSC Trusts for contact tracing for employees.

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How many people have been traced to date?

This information is updated weekly on the PHA website.

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StopCOVID NI App

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What is the StopCOVID NI app?

The StopCOVID NI app has been designed to assist in stopping the spread of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland. It anonymously contacts users who have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 and is also using the app.

It will help tell people you don't know, who would not be warned by the manual contact tracing process, that they might be infected.

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Does the app link with the PHA Contact Tracing Service (CTS)?

At present, the app does not link to the contact tracing service directly. Once someone has a positive test, contact tracing will be initiated. It will operate in parallel, encouraging 'high risk' contacts that might have been missed otherwise, to self isolate. Some people using the app may also be contacted by the Contact Tracing Service if they are known to the person who tests positive and their details have been passed to CTS. However, it has the added benefit of alerting other app users who may not be known to the person who tested positive, and they will be provided with advice through the app on what do.

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What do you do when the app tells you that you have been identified as a 'potential exposure'?

This notification tells you the app is working. A potential exposure notification lets you know the number of times in a week that your phone has noticed another phone where a user has a positive test, irrespective of duration and distance. No action is required in such a circumstance. A separate alert will be triggered when the app knows you are at risk as a close contact because of the degree and situation of exposure. It will tell you to self-isolate for 14 days. You must complete this isolation in full, even if you receive a negative test result at any point during this period.

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Who should download the app?

The app is free to download and use for anyone who is resident in Northern Ireland.

The app is intended only for people resident in Northern Ireland and should not be otherwise used.

Users downloading the app who are not resident in Northern Ireland will not be able to receive an authorisation code to input to the app if they receive a positive test for COVID-19, as the app is linked to the Northern Ireland test registry.

You must be at least 18 years of age in order to download and use the app.

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How can I download the app?

The app has been designed specifically for use on mobile phones – Apple and Android – and therefore cannot be downloaded for use on iPads or other mobile devices which use different operating systems.

The app is available, free of charge, from both the Apple App store and the Google Play store.

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How does the app work?

The phones of those using the app emit anonymised coded 'keys', 'Identifier Beacons', which change every 15 minutes.

'Keys' are stored on the user's phone for 14 days before being discarded.

When close to each other, app users' phones exchange these anonymous 'keys', and if they are in close proximity with another user for a significant period of time, both will store the anonymous 'key' of the other phone for 14 days.

If an app user tests positive for COVID-19 the user is encouraged to enter their positive result/update their status on the app, it will then notify any app users that have been closer than two metres for more than fifteen minutes (this is in line with current public health policy, and can be changed depending on advised best practice), in the previous 14 days.

If you get a notification via the app telling you that you were in contact with someone who has tested positive you must self-isolate for 14 days.

The process is also outlined in the video below:

https://youtu.be/ZIWBm40ruIA

The app uses capabilities of mobile operating systems. Apple and Google have developed a method that allows specific government-only COVID-19 apps to make use of Bluetooth technology on phones that would otherwise not be available.

As the app will need to use the most current version of the phone's operating system, users may be asked to upgrade the first time they use it. None personal information in this app is ever shared with Apple or Google. The app cannot be used on older phones, on which it is not possible to upgrade the operating system.

It is not available on phones which use a different operating system, other than the Android or iOS systems deployed by Google/Apple.

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StopCOVID NI notifications explained
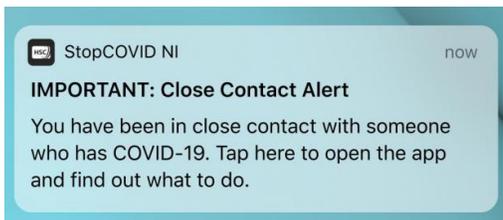
Exposure 'log' notification

This is an image of an exposure 'log' notification.

It is not an exposure notification. On seeing this you should not self-isolate.

It means you have been close to another app user, but does not follow the setting of 2 metres or less, for 15 minutes or more. It is a problem with the iOS system that Apple will be removing in future versions.

Only if you have been close enough, for long enough, to an app user that tests positive, will you receive a clear exposure notification from the app.
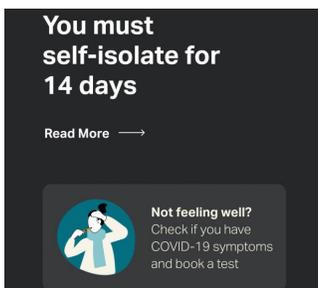
Exposure notification

This is an image of an exposure notification.

If you receive this notification it means you have been close to another app user who has tested positive.
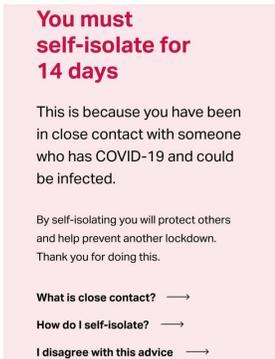
StopCOVID NI exposure notification – homescreen

This is an image of the homescreen of the StopCOVID NI app once you have received an exposure notification.

If you click on the 'read more' button you will be directed to additional information on what you should do next.

StopCOVID NI exposure notification – further information

You must self-isolate for 14 days

This is because you have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19 and could be infected.

By self-isolating you will protect others and help prevent another lockdown. Thank you for doing this.

What is close contact? ⟶

How do I self-isolate? ⟶

I disagree with this advice ⟶

This image shows further information within the app that you will receive if you receive an exposure notification.

This information outlines how long you must self-isolate for and why you must do so.

It also contains links to information on close contacts and how to self-isolate.

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Turning the app off

It's important the app is active as much as possible to help stop the spread of coronavirus. If you need to disable it for any reason, you can do this by turning off your phone's Bluetooth feature.

If you work somewhere that uses social distancing and added safety measures (for example, perspex screens and PPE), you can disable the app while working.

The app doesn't know you have extra protection from close contact in this scenario, so disabling it will avoid 'false' contact notifications.

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What data the app uses

Metric data does not identify you and is used to create aggregate views of how the app is being used and the impact it is having on the virus. Here is a list of the app metrics which, if you consent, are collected from your app.

- The number of app users
- Ratio of exposure notifications to positive cases, measured at a regional level (not related to any individual user). The Department of Health will not know who, where or when, simply total numbers of 'authorisation codes' and 'exposure notifications' in any given time period.

No personally identifiable information is entered on the app. The 'app settings' gives you the ability to remove the app at any time, and any information stored on the phone while using the app.

If you are notified that you have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive, you will be advised to self-isolate for 14 days, and get a test if you start to have the symptoms of COVID-19 infection. You will not be given the identity of the person who tested positive – likewise, if you test positive an input the code to the app to alert close contacts, those contacts will not be given your identity – it is all completely anonymous.

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