

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



**BY EMAIL**

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Your Ref:  
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Dear Colleagues

**COVID-19 TESTING IN RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES WITH A  
SUSPECTED OR CONFIRMED COVID-19 OUTBREAK**

In our previous correspondence dated 28 July 2020 we committed to provide further information on the arrangements and frequency of testing for all care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak.

The current testing protocol in place for care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak has been further enhanced; this revised testing protocol **comes into operation from the date of this letter.**

It is important to identify both single cases and potential clusters of cases of COVID-19 in care homes. Early identification allows immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread of infection, thereby keeping residents and staff safe. If a care home has a single case or potential clusters of cases among residents and/or staff, the person in charge of the facility should:

- Contact the GP of affected residents to arrange clinical assessment;
- Contact the Public Health Agency (PHA) Duty Room on 0300 555 0119 or by email to: PHA.DutyRoom@hscni.net to complete a public health risk assessment;

Whether an outbreak is declared or not, the PHA Duty Officer will progress a risk assessment with the care home and advise staff of what further action(s) are required. **If testing is required as part of this risk assessment, HSC Trusts will support care homes in their area to undertake and complete a full round of testing of staff and residents.**

## **TESTING FREQUENCY**

The number of testing rounds to be undertaken in a care home with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak will be determined taking into account the specific circumstances of that care home.

### **Care homes with a single symptomatic individual**

If a single individual (resident and/or staff member) is symptomatic, the individual will be tested for COVID-19. **If the test result is positive, then a programme of whole care home testing (all staff and residents) will be carried out immediately.** If the test result is **negative**, the PHA will not initiate whole care home testing at that stage, but will continue to closely monitor the situation in the care home and may need to advise whole home testing at a later date.

If a **second individual** in the same care home experiences symptoms within a **14 day period** from when the first individual developed symptoms (but tested negative), that person will also be tested for COVID-19. If the test result for the **second individual is positive, whole care home testing (for all staff and all residents) will be carried out immediately.** If the test result for the second individual is **negative**, the PHA will not initiate whole care home testing at that stage (as test results for two individuals are negative), but will continue to closely monitor the situation in that particular care home.

If, following the **two negative** test results, there are no further individuals reporting symptoms for 14 days following symptom(s) onset in the last person, then that care home will return to the cohort of 'green homes' (without an outbreak) in which the regular programme of testing is conducted through the National Testing Programme.

### **Care homes with two or more symptomatic individuals at the same time**

**Where two or more people among staff or residents are reporting symptoms at the same time, whole care home testing for COVID-19 (for all staff and all residents) will be undertaken immediately.**

In these circumstances, a second round of COVID-19 testing will be undertaken 4 to 7 days following the first round of testing. The purpose of this second round of testing is to help identify any false positive and/or false negative test results that may have occurred during the first round of testing and also to inform an assessment of whether the outbreak (that is the number of confirmed cases) is increasing, stabilising or decreasing.

For all care homes where an outbreak or cluster of infection has been identified, a further (third) round of testing will be carried out 28 days following the symptom onset in the last known case (either among staff and residents) in the home.

It is important to note that any individual who tests positive for COVID-19 will not be tested again for a minimum period of 6 weeks. This is because any repeat test may result in a positive result due to the presence of residual (dead) virus within the individual's system, but does not represent active infection with the virus. Depending on the scheduled testing programme implemented by a care home for its regular

monthly programme of testing of residents, this may mean a period of up to 8 weeks before a resident is tested again.

We would wish to assure you that the position on frequency of testing for staff and residents in care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak, will be kept under active review by the Department. Any requirement to vary the frequency of the testing undertaken in care homes will be clearly informed by emerging scientific evidence and other contributory factors, including community transmission rates over the coming months.

We sincerely thank you for your ongoing and continued support in this important matter.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Michael McBride**  
**Chief Medical Officer**



**Professor Charlotte McArdle**  
**Chief Nursing Officer**