

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



Department of  
**Health**

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

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**BY EMAIL**

Registered Manager - Nursing and Residential Homes

Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
BELFAST  
BT4 3SQ  
Tel: 028 9052 0563  
Email: [Michael.McBride@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:Michael.McBride@health-ni.gov.uk)  
Your Ref:  
Our Ref:  
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Dear Colleagues

**COVID-19 TESTING ARRANGEMENTS FOR RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES**

Programme of COVID-19 Testing in Care Homes

Protecting residents and staff in our care homes across Northern Ireland remains a key priority throughout all phases of the current COVID-19 pandemic and we will all continue to face a number of challenges in the months ahead.

The more prevalent the virus is in our community, the greater the risk of it spreading into our care homes. On 3 November 2020, Minister announced his intention to increase the frequency of COVID-19 testing for staff working in care homes, moving from fortnightly testing to a once a week testing cycle. I thought it timely to write to all care home providers to outline the current COVID-19 testing arrangements for care homes; **Annex A** sets out the current position in the following areas:

- Regular care home testing;
- Care homes with a single symptomatic individual (staff or resident);
- Outbreak testing for care homes with two or more symptomatic individuals (staff or resident) within a 14 day period; and
- Additional Information:
  - Testing at 28 days following an outbreak;
  - Individuals in care homes who test positive for COVID-19;
  - Managing a second positive test result for COVID-19 in a care home setting; and
  - Testing prior to discharge from hospital to a care home.

Regular testing in care homes across Northern Ireland has undoubtedly reduced the impact of COVID-19 during the second wave of this pandemic. Around half of the care home outbreaks in this second surge have been triggered by the identification of asymptomatic cases (cases with no symptoms). The early identification of single

cases and potential clusters of cases has enabled immediate steps to be taken to prevent the spread of infection and prevent further transmission in care home settings. I am in no doubt that our ability to identify positive cases and implement isolation measures early has been a critical factor in reducing potential harm to care home residents.

Whilst around a third of care homes in Northern Ireland have experienced a COVID-19 outbreak, there are early signs that the range of interventions put in place earlier this year, including the implementation of a regular testing programme (including asymptomatic and asymptomatic testing), has had an impact in reducing the negative outcomes associated with COVID-19 outbreaks in care homes.

This simply would not have been possible without the tremendous support, dedication and work of all care home staff. I do not underestimate the challenges involved in setting up and maintaining the programme of regular testing and I want to extend my sincere thanks to all care homes for implementing this significant programme to ensure the continued safety of all residents and staff. I also want to sincerely thank colleagues in PHA, HSC and HSC Trusts who have progressed very significant work to enable and support this programme.

#### Visiting and Care Partner Arrangements in Care Homes over the Christmas Period

A Departmental letter was issued on 16 December 2020 to all care homes about visiting arrangements. It remains the Department's position that care home visiting and care partners can be safely facilitated through compliance with the current regional principles for visiting in care settings, as clearly set out in existing guidance.

However, in recognition of the concerns felt by many homes about visiting and care partner arrangements, the Department has announced the provision of further support and assurance to care homes for an interim period over the festive season. If a care home provider perceives a need for additional risk mitigation within the care home setting, then COVID-19 testing is being made available for visitors who may choose to have a test prior to visiting their loved one in a care home setting.

It is important to note that this extension to existing COVID-19 testing arrangements is limited to **1 visitor (or care partner) per resident per week** and will be accessible until **Friday 8 January 2021**. It is essential that care home managers take responsibility for ensuring that families and staff do not place excessive reliance on testing alone as the only risk mitigating measure to enable visiting. Further information on visiting and care partner arrangements for care homes over the Christmas period is provided at **Annex B**. This information is provided for care home providers who may wish to share with their residents' family members and visitors.

#### New Testing Technologies

As our understanding of this virus develops and we learn more about the impact of the virus across different settings, I would assure you of our continued commitment to reducing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus by identifying positive cases early and taking appropriate measures to ensure that residents and staff are protected.

New testing technologies, for example Lateral Flow Tests are continuing to develop at pace. It is important that all of these new tests are fully validated to determine their suitability and use across different settings. In Northern Ireland, we are currently progressing work on a number of New Testing Interventions (NTIs). These NTIs are still at an early stage of development, and consequently these new tests must be introduced and used with careful planning and appropriate evaluation of impact. The learning from this work will add to the findings of similar initiatives undertaken in other parts of the UK. This learning will support and inform the consideration of further use of these tests over the coming months.

Once again my team and I wish to extend our sincere thanks to all care home providers, managers and staff for their dedication and work to ensure the continued safety of all residents and staff. Thank you also to colleagues in PHA, HSCB and HSC Trusts for your continuing support.

Yours sincerely



**DR MICHAEL McBRIDE**  
**Chief Medical Officer**

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## COVID-19 TESTING GUIDANCE FOR CARE HOMES

### When to Test in Care Homes

Testing for COVID-19 in care home settings should be undertaken in one of three circumstances<sup>1</sup>:

1. Regular care home testing;
2. Testing of symptomatic individuals;
3. As part of the management of an outbreak of COVID-19.

Any questions about interpretation of this testing guidance should be directed to the Public Health Agency (PHA) Health Protection Duty Room (HPDR) in the first instance.

#### HPDR Contact Details:

- Telephone: 0300 555 0119
- Email: [PHA.DutyRoom@hscni.net](mailto:PHA.DutyRoom@hscni.net)

### 1 Regular Care Home Testing

Regular care home testing is aimed at identifying asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 (that is cases who have no symptoms) and to support early intervention to minimise the risk of spread.

Regular testing for care home residents should be undertaken **EVERY 4 WEEKS** (through the National Testing Initiative - Pillar 2). Residents should be tested at least once a month, even during an outbreak as per Section 3.

Regular testing for care home staff should be undertaken **WEEKLY** (Pillar 2). Weekly testing of staff will also continue through an outbreak (ref: Section 3)

Regular Care Home Testing				
	Day 7	Day 14	Day 21	Day 28
<b>Residents</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	P2
<b>Staff</b>	P2	P2	P2	P2

*P1=Pillar 1, P2=Pillar 2*

Please note: Individuals who have a positive COVID-19 test should **NOT** be retested for 90 days following their positive test (ref: Section 4.2)

<sup>1</sup> Testing of visitors is not addressed in this guidance document.

## 2 Care Homes with a Single Symptomatic Individual (Staff or Resident)

### a) Single symptomatic individual

Test for COVID-19:

- If the test is **positive for COVID-19**, proceed to test **ALL** staff and residents in the care home immediately (Whole Home Testing) and ensure guidance is followed in respect of isolation of the positive case; this is **10 days** from onset of symptoms for staff, and **14 days** for residents. Inform the HPDR.
- If no further **positive** cases are identified through the Whole Home Testing, further testing at **Day 4-7 is not required**.
- If the test is **negative for COVID-19**, continue to monitor the situation closely.

### b) Second symptomatic individual within 14 day period from the 1<sup>st</sup> person developing symptoms but 1<sup>st</sup> person tested negative

Test 2<sup>nd</sup> individual for COVID-19:

- If the test is **positive for COVID-19**, proceed to test all staff and residents in care home immediately and ensure guidance followed in respect of isolation of positive case; this is **10 days** from onset of symptoms for staff, and **14 days** for residents. Inform the HPDR.
- If the test is **negative for COVID-19**, continue to monitor the situation closely.

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 the care home will return to the cohort of 'green homes' (without an outbreak) in which the regular programme of testing is conducted through the Pillar 2.

## 3 Outbreak Testing - Care Homes with Two or More Symptomatic Individuals (Staff or Resident) within a 14 Day Period

Outbreak Care Home Testing					
	Day 0*	Day 4-7	Day 14	Day 21	Day 28
<b>Residents</b>	P1	P1	N/A	N/A	P2
<b>Staff</b>	P1	P1	P2	P2	P2

P1=Pillar 1, P2=Pillar 2

\* the need for Day 0 test will depend if outbreak is triggered by regular testing or by testing a symptomatic case – please contact HPDR for advice if required.

Once an outbreak has been declared by the PHA, the day the outbreak is declared by the HPDR is **Day zero '0'**.

- **Whole Home Testing** should be completed **immediately** (round 1).
- If the positive cases triggering the outbreak have been identified during regular weekly staff testing (round 1), **ALL residents** should be tested immediately (same day if possible, but within 24 hours via the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust - Pillar 1); this completes round 1 of Whole Home Testing.
- Second round of testing should be undertaken **4-7 Days** after first round in Pillar 1.
- A third round of testing should take place at **Day 28** in Pillar 2.
- Results of all testing should be shared and discussed with the HPDR.
- Regular **weekly staff testing** and testing **residents every 4 weeks** should continue using Pillar 2 regardless of the length of the outbreak.

Isolation and IPC requirements in managing the outbreak will be directed by the HPDR.

## 4 Additional Guidance

### 4.1 Testing at 28 Days Following an Outbreak

It is a requirement to complete Whole Home Testing at **Day 28** regardless of the outbreak status in the care home. The care home will continue with regular 28 days testing during any outbreak situation which will determine any onward transmission of infections.

Any additional requirement for testing during an outbreak will be decided on case by case basis, taking into account the effectiveness of control measures and any evidence of transmission.

#### **Scenario 1**

Positive cases (asymptomatic) are identified through the regular 'green home' testing programme (Pillar 2) triggering an outbreak (need to have 2 cases to trigger an outbreak).

- The day the outbreak is declared by the HPDR is **Day 0**.
- If the positive cases triggering the outbreak have been identified during weekly staff testing (round 1), **ALL residents** should be tested immediately (same day if possible but within 24 hours) – this completes round 1 of Whole Home Testing.
- A second round of Whole Home Testing is required at **Day 4-7**.

- Continue with **28 Days** testing as part of regular testing programme for residents and weekly testing for staff as follows:
  - 28 days from the date of the test of the last ASSYMPTOMATIC case OR 28 days after onset of symptoms of the last SYMPTOMATIC case.

## **Scenario 2**

Symptomatic cases reported to the HPDR triggering an outbreak (two or more possible or confirmed cases).

- Whole Home Testing should be arranged as soon as possible (round 1)
- A further round of Whole Home Testing is required at **Day 4-7** (round 2)
- Continue with **28 Days** testing as part of regular testing programme for residents and weekly testing for staff as follows:
  - 28 days from the date of the test of the last ASSYMPTOMATIC case OR 28 days after onset of symptoms of the last SYMPTOMATIC case

## **4.2 Individuals in Care Homes who Test Positive for COVID-19**

**Any individual who tests positive for COVID-19, and remains asymptomatic should not be tested for 90 days.**

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. Testing outside this policy may add to confusion and act as a trigger for inappropriate decision making.

## **4.3 Managing a Second Positive Test Result for COVID-19 in a Care Home Setting**

### **Asymptomatic Individuals**

- a. If, after 90 days a resident or staff member tests positive for a SECOND time in a care home and is symptom free, a precautionary approach should be taken and the individual asked to isolate for **14 days** (care home resident) or **10 days** (staff member).
- b. Recommencing routine testing - as long as an individual with a second positive test remains asymptomatic, they should not be retested for the

recommended period i.e. 90 days from their most recent test. The individual can then be included in the next round of regular home testing.

### Symptomatic individuals

- c. If an individual becomes symptomatic at any stage after their initial test (i.e. before the 90 day period is completed or after 90 days has elapsed but before next round of regular routine testing), they should be managed as a suspected COVID-19 case and asked to isolate and be tested.
- d. Tests should be processed in all symptomatic residents using HSC Trusts (local labs) in Pillar 1.

Note: a positive result will also reset the start date for the 90 day period within which the individual should not be routinely tested. If the test result is negative, the 90 day period will remain unchanged (i.e. taken from the first positive COVID-19 result).

## 4.4 Testing Prior to Discharge from Hospital to a Care Home

### IMMUNOCOMPETENT

- If previously tested negative during routine testing in hospital – the person needs to be tested (48hours before discharge). If the result is positive and their discharge is planned within their 14 day isolation period, they should only be discharged to a setting that can provide appropriate isolation i.e. single room, own bathroom etc.
- An immunocompetent resident who has **tested positive within the previous 90 days, and remains asymptomatic, does not need to be re-tested** before discharge to the care home.
- If a resident is **re-tested within 90** days from their initial illness onset or test date and found to **still be positive for SARS-CoV-2**, a clinically led approach should be used to interpret the result and inform subsequent action taking into account several factors, such as: COVID-19 symptoms, underlying clinical conditions, immunosuppressive treatments and conditions, and additional information such as cycle threshold values. Seek advice from an infection specialist/microbiologist as required.
- If a person is re-tested by PCR **after 90 days from their initial illness onset or test and is found to be positive**, this should be considered as a possible new infection. If they have developed new COVID-19 symptoms, they would need to self-isolate again and their contacts should be traced.

## **IMMUNOSUPPRESSED**

- The decision to test or not to test immunocompromised residents is a clinical/specialist decision that needs to be considered on a case by case basis taking into symptoms, underlying clinical conditions, resident current treatments and conditions, and other additional information. Seek advice from an infection specialist/microbiologist as required.

### **4.5 Information**

HSC Trusts and Care Homes are reminded of the importance of having complete information on ALL requests for COVID-19 tests, submitted through both Pillars 1 and 2, which should include the following information as a minimum:

- Individual's Health and Care Number (HCN) – individuals may access this through their GP or their HCN number will also be on medical cards, any HSC documentation people may have received, or on prescriptions;
- Care Home name/code; and
- Indication if the test is for a staff member or resident.

## **VISITING AND CARE PARTNER ARRANGEMENTS IN CARE HOMES OVER THE CHRISTMAS PERIOD**

The decision to facilitate visitors into a care home and how visiting is organised is the responsibility of the care home manager; such decisions should be based on a dynamic risk assessment, taking into account the particular circumstances of the individual resident and the care home in question, in order to ensure the safety of all residents, staff and visitors.

For an interim period, further support is being made available to all care home providers in Northern Ireland to facilitate visiting in line with the existing published guidance over the Christmas period.

By carefully following the advice described below, everyone will be playing their part in helping to protect not just their loved one who is resident in a care home, but all the people with whom their loved one shares their home, from the risk of infection.

### **What can I do to make my visit safer?**

Anyone planning to visit a care home over the Christmas period should take great care to reduce the possibility of becoming infected with COVID-19 prior to their visit by adhering to the following advice:

- Limit your contact with other people, wear a face covering in any indoor settings that are outside your household and where social distancing may be difficult;
- Wash your hands regularly;
- Maintain social distancing with anyone outside your household or bubble;
- Avoid the use of public transport where possible – more information is available at the following link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/safer-travel-guidance-public-transport-users-walkers-cyclists-drivers; and>

- If you develop symptoms (fever, new cough or loss of taste and smell) or feel unwell at any time before your visit please stay at home and follow guidance on isolation and getting tested: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus>.

Visitors may find it helpful to watch the following video which provides guidance on handwashing and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for care home visitors and care home partners during the COVID-19 pandemic:

<https://youtu.be/9PCqT3aS8d8>

More information on preventing the spread of infection is also available at the following link: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/covid-19-information-public>

### **Why have I been asked by my care home to have a test before visiting?**

Testing people who visit a care home can reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 by identifying people who might be carrying the SARS-CoV-2 virus but who are not showing symptoms.

It is important to be aware that while a test for COVID-19 may reduce the risk associated with visiting, it is not fool proof and does not completely remove the risk of infection.

This is why all other Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures such as hand washing, maintaining social distance and wearing of PPE, including wearing a face covering, **must continue to be used at all times during each visit.**

### **Do I have to take a test?**

If you do not want to take a test or it is not possible for you to be tested you should be reassured that your visit can proceed, please do discuss arrangements for safe visiting and pre-visit planning with the Care Home manager.

### **When should I get tested?**

You should plan the date and time for your visit with the Care Home. Once this has been agreed, you should complete your test at least one full day (but no more than 2 days) before the time of your visit, this is to allow sufficient time for you to have the test results before your planned visit.

Test results will normally be returned within 24 hours of the testing being taken. The time between your test and your visit should be kept to a minimum to reduce the risk of picking up COVID-19 infection between your test and visit. Please follow the guidance carefully on making your visit safer.

### **How do I get tested?**

Special arrangements have been made at all the testing centres in Northern Ireland between **now and 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021** for anyone wishing to visit a care home to have a test for COVID-19.

**Please note that you do not have to book a test in advance between now and Friday 8 January 2021 - you can just attend the testing centre.**

A list of the Test centres is included at the end of this leaflet. Please check which one would be closest to you. Once you arrive at the test centre – let the staff know that you are asking for a test prior to visiting a care home and this will be facilitated. NOTE: please check on the link below for the location of mobile testing units as they may be moved at short notice in response to demand:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

In advance of attending a test centre, it will be important for you to have watched the videos on how to perform the test (nose and throat swab). This is available at the following link: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

**PLEASE REMEMBER** to register your test kit on the website (<https://test-for-coronavirus.service.gov.uk/register-kit>) so that your test result can be sent to you.

This registration is completed after the test with the unique number you have on your test sample. The unique number will look like this example “AAA12345678”

If you do not have access to a computer, ask a family member or friend to assist you. If that is not possible, please contact the Care Home for advice.

### **When will I get my test result?**

Once your test kit is registered (where you are asked to provide a mobile phone number and an email address) and you have completed your swab, you should normally receive your results within 24 hours by text and email.

### **Will having a negative test mean that visiting is safe?**

No test is 100% accurate all the time. All visitors should continue to follow all instructions from the care home to make each visit as safe as possible. This includes washing your hands thoroughly, wearing PPE as required and staying within designated parts of the care home.

### **Do I still need to book a visit to a care home if I have a negative test result?**

Yes. Friends and relatives have a very important role and responsibility to help care homes keep their loved ones safe. In addition to using personal protective equipment (PPE), it is important that the numbers of visitors to any one Care Home are limited at any one time, so that social distance can be maintained and staff can support safe visiting in addition to their caring responsibilities. Each Care Home will be able to tell you how to book a visit.

### **When can I visit after I get my test result?**

If the visitor's test for COVID-19 is negative, the visit can proceed as agreed with the care home. You should bring proof of your negative test result to the Care Home and also follow all the infection prevention measures that the Care Home has in place. A staff member in the Care Home will guide you through these. You may also have your temperature checked and are likely to be asked some questions to ensure you have no other symptoms of COVID-19.

**What happens if my test result is positive?**

If you receive a positive COVID-19 test result you will not be able to visit the Care Home. You and your close contacts will need to self-isolate for a period of 10 days in line with the public health advice. Further information can be found at the following link: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus>

**If my relative/loved one is being cared for in a home with an outbreak, can I still visit?**

During an outbreak in a care home visiting will not be allowed other than in exceptional circumstances.

## COVID-19 TESTING CENTRES OVER THE CHRISTMAS PERIOD – AVAILABLE UNTIL FRIDAY 8 JANUARY 2021

Testing is available across a number of testing sites. Information on testing site locations is available at the following link:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

- Fixed drive through centres:
  - Belfast: SSE Test Centre, Odyssey Car park
  - Derry/Londonderry: The LYCRA Company Car Park
  - Craigavon: Central Sports Arena
  - Enniskillen: St Angelo Airport
- Walk through test sites:
  - Ulster University (Car Park 4), Coleraine
  - Magee Ulster University, Londonderry
  - Ballymena Showgrounds, Ballymena
  - Car Park at Queen's Sports Club (PEC), Belfast
  - Longstone Car Park, Lisburn
- Testing at one of 8 mobile testing units. **PLEASE NOTE:** The mobile testing units provide a temporary testing site that is set up in response to local demand. Individuals should therefore arrange to check the locations of the mobile testing units available at the following link:  
<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>
- If necessary, the care home may also facilitate testing of visitors through its regular programme of weekly staff testing using the PCR test kits accessed through the National Testing Programme. **PLEASE NOTE:** If the visitor is tested in the care home, the completed test kit should be registered using the following link: <https://test-for-coronavirus.service.gov.uk/register-kit>

**REMEMBER:** Please access the following link to find out more information on the COVID-19 testing process. Please watch the video instruction on how to self-swab.  
<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>