

Message from the Medical Superintendent of NIHRACS

Update for the Public: COVID 19

2 April 2020

Thank you to all who are diligently following self-isolation and self-distancing rules on Norfolk Island. Your social responsibility is of utmost importance to all of our community particularly those at high risk of developing COVID-19. This will not last forever and what we do now can be the difference between life and death for some people.

I am sure that most of you have been seeing and hearing plenty of information about COVID-19. I will therefore highlight only a few significant matters.

Symptoms of COVID-19:

As of today we still do not have a proven positive test of COVID 19 on Norfolk. I will reiterate though that this is a highly infectious virus and there are possibly individuals who have or have had COVID 19 without realising. It is therefore NOT SAFE to assume that you do not have COVID 19.. Rather call the hospital or GP clinic for advice and we will arrange a test and isolate you from others, until the test returns negative. We do have a drive-in clinic available which you may be directed to attend, by the doctor you speak to.

We will continue to test anyone calling the GP practice with symptoms that could be COVID-19. The main symptoms of COVID-19 are:

fever, cough, myalgia (muscle pain), less commonly shortness of breath, sore throat, runny or blocked nose, loss of taste, diarrhoea and vomiting.

Basic principles of reducing viral spread:

- Maintain safe distances between persons in offices and workplaces during face to face meetings – 1.5m between each person.
- Wash hands regularly between all contact with surfaces or if not available, use hand sanitiser.
- Avoid touching the face (except after hand washing).
- Cover mouth and nose if you sneeze and cough using your elbow, rather than your hand.
- Wipe down all hard surfaces in the workplace with detergent and water at least every 24 hours.
- Make hand hygiene products and suitable rubbish bins readily available.
- Conduct frequent waste disposal.

Testing for COVID-19:

At present we have increased our testing in line with guidelines from NSW Health and have done approximately 40 tests to date. We only test symptomatic patients and are unable to do widespread COVID-19 testing. Testing asymptomatic (well) people with the currently available throat and nasal swab is of limited value. This test relies on the person having an active infection to be positive. There has been widespread discussion about a blood antibody test, but this is not yet available. If you have had a swab test done, please stay in isolation, as advised, until you are told the result by the doctor and cleared from isolation.

Clearance from COVID-19 after self-isolation:

Before the end of your isolation period of 14 days for persons coming to Norfolk, you will be risk assessed by telephone consult by a doctor at NIHRACS before being cleared by the Norfolk Island Police. More information regarding this process will be given to you by the Police. You cannot leave your isolation until you are officially cleared.

Doctors' appointments and travel to Australia:

If you are unwell with flu-like or respiratory symptoms please DO NOT come to the clinic unless it is urgent. Isolate yourself from others immediately and call the GP clinic for advice. You will be given a telephone consultation with a doctor at a specified time. Even in urgent cases, call an ambulance and advise of your symptoms so that we can care for you in an isolation area. We need to reduce the risk of infection in our hospital and to protect our staff and other patients. If you have a doctor's appointment booked ahead for chronic conditions, even if you are well, we may be able to consult with you on the telephone. Please call the clinic to discuss this possibility.

When you speak to a doctor or nurse you will also be asked to list your close contacts from 1 day before the onset of your illness. This is so that if you return a positive test we can trace your contacts more readily.

If you have a doctor's appointment, a procedure or surgery planned in Australia, please ask for a telephone consult with a doctor to discuss the urgency of this appointment. In some cases we can arrange a Telehealth with your specialist. We know that many appointments are being cancelled in Australia and surgery postponed. If you do need to go, there are current border controls in place, Please check the requirements for each state before travelling. You may require a doctor's letter. Patients returning to Norfolk after investigation or treatment, will need to be cleared to come back.

Influenza vaccines:

These should be available within a couple of weeks. We will announce in the media how we intend to arrange vaccination as soon as we receive them. We encourage as many people as possible on Norfolk to have this injection as we are obviously trying to prevent a simultaneous influenza and COVID-19 outbreak both for our at-risk patients and our limited numbers of healthcare workers.

Thank you to each and every one on Norfolk for working together to keep this community safe.

Dr Michelle Bonnici

Medical Superintendent, NIHRACS