

Stark warning from Government as Covid-19 cases continue to rise

Pdf by:
<https://www.pro-memoria.info>

Gibraltarians were urged to avoid large gatherings and strictly follow Public Health advice on Friday, as the number of Covid-19 cases on the Rock continued to rise and more hospitalisations expected too in coming days.

The Gibraltar Government stopped short of tightening rules on gatherings and mask use but said personal responsibility was vital to curtail the "exponential" increase in cases in recent days.

To underscore the seriousness of the situation, the Government said it would cancel its own Christmas parties and receptions in the run-up to the festive season.

"The public, at this stage, are ultimately called upon to exercise their own judgement in this respect bearing in mind the current advice given," No.6 Convent Place said.

"This consideration should include the number of persons, the setting whether indoor or outdoor, the degree of ventilation if indoor and whether those attending are vaccinated, elderly or vulnerable."

"In the same way as has happened in the past, this advice may change going forward."

On Friday there were 57 new cases reported on the Rock, bringing the total number of active cases to 365.

There was a slight increase in hospitalisations too, with four people on the Covid-19 ward in St Bernard's Hospital and one in the critical care unit.

Dr Helen Carter, the Director of Public Health, warned there was a time-

lag between rising cases and hospitalisations, which normally increase a week to 10 days after a spike in infections.

That means the number of hospitalised cases of coronavirus is likely to rise in the coming days.

"We've been seeing this in pretty much every country," she said.

"Two weeks after the cases go up, you do see an increase in hospitalisations."

"Are we preparing and are we ready for that? Yes."

The advice issued on Friday is in stark contrast to Gibraltar's busy social calendar in recent weeks, which has been filled with a range of government-organised and private events that on occasion have brought together hundreds of people at a time in indoor spaces without mask requirements.

That is about to change, however, with ministers keeping the situation under constant review as they assess Public Health guidance on how best to balance the need to protect health while maintaining vital economic activity.

The rollout of the booster vaccine is a critical element of the strategy, with the jab largely breaking the link between infection and hospitalisation.

But with the number of infections increasing, so too is the likelihood that some of those who test positive will develop serious conditions.

Dr Carter acknowledged there was a "consistency conundrum" when deciding on what measures should be in place and how to apply them to the wide range of activities in Gibraltar, ranging from government-organised events to licensed premises and private gatherings.

She said the measures were being kept under review and ministers tasked with making the final decision had a range of options open to them going forward depending on how the Covid-19 situation evolves.

"It is incredibly difficult and I fully appreciate the public saying, 'you're making us wear masks when shopping but then there's an event wherever where people don't have to wear masks'," she told the Chronicle.

"We're in the process of reviewing this and clearly we're trying to standardise and reduce that consistency challenge."

The increase in numbers is not unexpected in the run-up to winter and is similar to the experience of many other countries around Europe.

But there has been a change in the pattern of transmission in Gibraltar in recent weeks and this is a source of concern.

Prior to midterm, epidemiological analysis of the data showed "localised, well-contained" outbreaks, Dr Carter said.

But after mid-term there has been a dramatic increase in cases suggesting "more sustained community transmission" of the virus.

"I do think we've changed now in terms of our transmission, as is being experienced across Europe," she said.

"In terms of what ministers are going to go for, they've been presented with a range of options and now they need to make a decision."

"It's a very dynamic risk assessment that's happening at the moment."

The Delta variant has also presented "a shift" in symptoms that further complicates the picture and how best to react to the situation.

Whereas other variants had clearly discernible symptoms including loss of taste, the Delta variant's symptoms are similar to those associated with

seasonal afflictions including allergies and mild colds.

The baseline for the community is simple, Dr Carter said: "If you have even mild symptoms, you do not go to any events."

The advice is to self-isolate immediately and call 111.

Since early October, Public Health Gibraltar has identified a number of organised events that have had adult positive cases associated with them.

There have also been separate community outbreaks related to different faith gatherings.

The data also points to a significant increase of transmission in the workplace.

Against this backdrop, the Government said it was essential that people are "cautious and sensible", avoiding large gatherings where possible, maintaining social distance and wearing masks when required in law or if they feel uncomfortable.

"It is important, in the above context, to limit mixing as much as possible," No.6 Convent Place said.

"The Government strongly advises against any large informal social events, parties or receptions being held over at least the next four weeks while the vaccine booster programme is rolled out."

"It will also become necessary at this point to make sure that the use of official premises is carefully scrutinised and where necessary events are postponed to a later date."

Gibraltar received another batch of the Pfizer/BioNTech Covid-19 vaccines this week and the booster program is now being rolled out to people over the age of 40.

But not everyone is taking up the offer of a third jab to boost immunity, which starts to wane some six months after the second dose.

Dr Carter said the take-up of the booster vaccine was "quite mixed", with older age groups more likely to get their top-up jabs than younger people.

That is reflected in the age breakdown of new cases.

"We're seeing far, far fewer in the older age groups [over 60s]," she said.

"And I think that's reflecting the booster uptake in those ages."

"I'm strongly, strongly saying to people that if they're invited for a booster, they should come and have it."

Dr Carter said there was a "window of opportunity" prior to the start of the festive season and that the booster rollout was the "way out" of the pandemic in the medium to long term.

Samantha Sacramento, the Minister for Health, added: "The drastic increase in the numbers of people testing positive for Covid-19 in recent days is a stark reminder that the virus is still very prevalent in our community and that it is the responsibility of us all to take every reasonable precaution to protect ourselves and our loved ones."

"The vaccination programme for 12-15 year olds and the booster vaccination programme are now underway, and Gibraltar received 4680 more doses this week."

"Everyone who is eligible for a vaccine or a booster is strongly encouraged to take up the offer when they are called."

What is the current Public Health guidance?

The current Public Health guidance is that the public should:

- Meet in open outdoor spaces where possible and to pay attention to ventilation where it is not. When people are meeting indoors, a window should be open for at least 10 minutes every hour.
- Wear a mask where it is required. This remains a great way to protect yourself, customers, clients, friends and family members.
- Maintain some physical distance when greeting. Shaking hands, kissing, hugging and close forms of endearment increase your exposure to viruses.
- Take responsibility when hosting an event or occasion to ensure all guests are safe. We are all responsible for our own health and wellbeing, but as a host, you are also taking on the obligation and responsibility to protect others.
- Clean your hands regularly to protect you and others from germs. Do so as often as you can. Use soap and water or 70% alcohol gel. Encourage guests to do the same.
- Take note of those who remain in close proximity to you. Be ready to provide this information if asked by the Contact Tracing Bureau.
- Risk assess all and any events. The main issue of concern will be the mix of those people attending. If there are significant numbers of people present, or expected to attend, who come from outside Gibraltar, it is important to consider that they may not be vaccinated or that they might be incubating/ carrying the virus. The size of the group and the density of the setting must be considered alongside other precautions.

Where are masks compulsory?

Masks continue to be one of the most effective methods of reducing transmission.

Masks are required to be worn in Gibraltar in:

- All retail shops and supermarkets
- Medical and Health Service establishments

- Public transport (Buses and Taxis)
- Funerals in a place of worship that is enclosed or substantially enclosed
- Gibraltar International Airport Terminal Close contacts of an active case must wear a mask when out in public, in the workplace, shopping or using public transport.

Pdf by:
<https://www.pro-memoria.info>