

MEDIA STATEMENT

20 Mar 2020
Prime Minister



Every Australian government is focused on slowing the spread of coronavirus to save lives.

The Prime Minister, state and territory Premiers and Chief Ministers met today for the National Cabinet and agreed to further actions to protect the Australian community from the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

The Chief Medical Officer provided the latest advice on the spread of COVID-19 globally and nationally. Leaders noted that Australia has one of the most comprehensive testing regimes in the world with over 100,000 Australian tests for COVID-19 having been undertaken. While the majority of COVID-19 cases in Australia continue to be from Australians returning from overseas, there have been a number of local outbreaks.

Every Australian has a part to play in slowing the spread of coronavirus.

All leaders reiterated the importance of Australians strictly adhering to social distancing and self isolation requirements, in particular for those who are unwell and for returned travellers. Not adhering to self isolation requirements when you are unwell puts the lives of your fellow Australians at risk.

The Governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia Dr Phil Lowe and the Treasury Secretary Dr Steven Kennedy provided an overview of the economic situation facing Australia as the world responds to COVID-19. Leaders welcomed the decisions by Australian banks to defer loan repayments for small businesses affected by COVID-19 by 6 months.

The National Cabinet agreed that putting budgets together at this time, with the great uncertainty that exists, is not something that any Commonwealth or State Government should be doing. The Federal Budget will be on Tuesday, 6 October 2020.

COVID-19 means that the way we go about our day to day lives is going to be different. The National Cabinet encourages Australians and businesses to adapt to the measures being put in place. It is vital that Australians adapt so they can go about their lives, run their businesses and work under these arrangements that could run for six months or more.

To slow the spread of COVID-19, the National Cabinet agreed to further detail on limits on indoor and outdoor gatherings designed specifically to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Australia. These measures were not taken lightly and are designed to protect the lives of Australians.

The National Cabinet reiterated there are extensive stocks and strong supply chains of food, groceries and medicine. Australia produces enough food for 75 million people and we are a country of 25 million. People hoarding food and medicines are leaving less available for vulnerable and sick Australians who need it. Police have been assisting to stamp out violent and anti-social behaviour.

Food stores have been limiting purchases of certain products to ensure restocking can meet demand. There are no supply shortages. The Commonwealth Government yesterday also announced restrictions on medicine purchases to ensure pharmacies can restock to meet demand so people can get the medicines they need.

The National Cabinet further noted again that in order to protect older Australians and vulnerable communities in the weeks and months ahead, Australia may see even more restrictions put on social and business movements. We need all Australians to please look out for each other and to follow the medical advice.

The National Cabinet will meet again on Tuesday 24 March 2020 to discuss further arrangements for domestic travel prior to the school holidays, arrangements for commercial and residential tenancies, managing critical health and hospital resources, and localised graduated responses to COVID-19.

Indoor Gatherings

As previously advised, non-essential indoor gatherings of **greater** than 100 people are not permitted.

This does not apply to essential activities such as public transportation facilities, medical and health care facilities, pharmacies, emergency service facilities, correctional facilities, youth justice centres or other places of custody, courts or tribunals, Parliaments, food markets, supermarkets and grocery stores, shopping centres, office buildings, factories, construction sites, mining sites, freight and logistics terminals, where it is necessary for their normal operation (although social distancing and hygiene practices are required in these settings).

National Cabinet agreed to risk mitigation measures for non-essential indoor gatherings of **fewer** than 100 people including the following:

- In a given occupied space, there must be a density of no more than one person per four square metres of floor space. The 4 square metre arrangements for venues will come into effect from 20 March 2020 and will be mandated through state and territory regulatory arrangements.
 - For example, there can be 25 people in a 100 square metre room, who should maintain a physical healthy distance between each other of 1.5 metres.
- Hand hygiene products and suitable waste receptacles must be made available, with frequent cleaning and waste disposal taking place.
- The Department of Health recommendations for unwell individuals to isolate at home must be promoted.
- For example:
 - Cinemas and theatres will decrease density of patrons, which could include alternate seating, staggered seating and alternate rows, except for family groups who may be seated together.
 - Seated restaurants may need to undertake a capacity reduction in order to meet the above density requirements.

Safe food and utensil handling statement for catering

The National Cabinet noted the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) advice that the primary transmission route for COVID-19 is person-to-person; it may therefore be transmitted via utensils or plates that have been handled by someone who has COVID-19.

- For catering, advise staff if they feel unwell to stay at home, and deny entry to staff who are unwell.
- All food, including pre-packaged foods such as boxed lunches, should be prepared by staff trained in safe food handling practices.

Ensure hand washing facilities are accessible for staff and supplied with adequate soap and paper towels.

Further information is available here: <https://www.health.gov.au/committees-and-groups/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc>

Outdoor Events

As previously advised, outdoor events of fewer than 500 attendees may proceed. There are general measures that all events should follow:

- In a given occupied space, there must be no more than one person per four square metres of ground space.
- Availability of hand hygiene products and suitable waste receptacles, with frequent cleaning and waste disposal.
- Promotion of the Department of Health recommendations for unwell individuals to isolate at home and not attend.

Food markets are exempt from the 500 person limit, however must undertake additional measures, such as control of patronage level numbers or stall density reduction to decrease the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Special exemptions for limitations on indoor and outdoor gatherings

There may be other gatherings that are not specifically mentioned here that are considered essential. The National Cabinet agreed that it is at the discretion of the individual state and territory Chief Health Officers or equivalent to assess each on their merits, and determine whether they can continue if mitigated by social distancing measures.

The development of any guideline requires continual re-evaluation and amendments or new guidelines may be released as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to progress.

Domestic Travel

As previously advised, all Australians should reconsider the need for unnecessary travel. If people are unwell they must stay at home, unless they are seeking medical care.

The National Cabinet previously agreed that public transport is essential and that AHPPC advice should apply in relation to public transport (trains, trams, buses, ferries), taxi and ride share vehicles and transport of vulnerable populations, with particular attention given to cleaning and hygiene.

The National Cabinet previously agreed that domestic air travel is low risk.

The next meeting of the National Cabinet will consider further arrangements for domestic travel.

International Travel Restrictions

The National Cabinet noted the AHPPC's advice on high-risk countries for COVID-19 importation risk and its continued support for the 14 day self isolation requirement for all returning travellers.

The National Cabinet welcomed the Commonwealth Government's decision to stop the entry of non-citizens and non-permanent residents and their immediate families into Australia after 9pm AEDT on Friday 20 March 2020 in order to align international travel restrictions with the risks. Limited exemptions will be available under the authority of the Australian Border Force Commissioner, focussed on individuals providing critical or essential services or on compassionate grounds.

Remote Communities

Isolation and remoteness offer opportunities for delaying or potentially preventing an outbreak of COVID-19 in remote Indigenous communities. However, high mobility of community members and a reliance on visiting and outreach activities and services increase the risk of COVID-19 occurring in these communities.

The National Cabinet provided in-principle agreement to the Commonwealth Minister for Health taking action under the Commonwealth *Biosecurity Act 2015* to restrict travel into remote Indigenous communities to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Under this measure, states and territories will nominate areas in consultation with Indigenous communities, and an emergency requirement determined under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* will restrict persons from entering or leaving those nominated areas.

This follows the decisions of a number of Indigenous communities and the Western Australian Government to implement similar measures, and considerations by the Northern Territory Government to phase up their response by restricting access to remote communities.

Under this proposal an emergency requirement determined under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* will restrict persons from entering or leaving areas as nominated by states and territories.

The emergency requirement will also allow jurisdictions to nominate a decision maker who will be empowered to permit additional classes of people to enter or leave the community in certain circumstances (e.g., to provide services that are essential for that particular community, such as child care support or mental health services).

Consistent with AHPPC guidance, individuals will be required to undergo a minimum period of isolation (currently 14 days) before entry or re-entry into the area will be allowed.

These rules are aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19 in remote communities and to rapidly address outbreaks. Enforcement of these restrictions will be the responsibility of each jurisdiction. The National Cabinet agreed that these measures would be implemented as soon as possible.

Supermarkets and retailers

The National Cabinet reiterated that Australia's food and medicine supplies are secure and there is no need to panic buy. Australians must stop hoarding from supermarkets, chemists and other retail outlets. There is no need to do this and it is depriving elderly and vulnerable Australians of essential supplies.

Criminal or violent behaviour will not be tolerated and will be dealt with swiftly by police. This behaviour is un-Australian.

A Supermarkets Taskforce has been established to work with all levels of government, industry and the community to ensure supermarkets can continue providing essential daily supplies and to rapidly resolve issues that may prevent this such as trucking curfews, home delivery arrangements and workforce safety.

Schools, Early Learning and Childcare

Arrangements for schools have not changed.

Consistent with earlier advice on schools, the National Cabinet agreed to the AHPPC advice regarding child care centre closures and noted that "pre-emptive closures are not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention to prevent community transmission of COVID-19 at this time."

AHPPC also provided a series of risk mitigation measures for early learning and child care, including:

- exclusion of unwell staff, children and visitors;
- reduce mixing of children by separating cohorts (including the staggering of meal and play times);
- enhanced personal hygiene for children, staff and parents;
- full adherence to the NHMRC childcare cleaning guidelines;
- excursions other than to local parks should be discouraged; and

- influenza vaccination for children, staff and parents.

AHPPC also noted that, “there may need to be consideration of alternative arrangements for highly vulnerable children” and recommended “these parents seek medical advice.”

Strategies to reduce transmission in schools were included in AHPPC’s advice on 17 March and include reducing public gatherings and mixing of students. Further information is available here : <https://www.health.gov.au/committees-and-groups/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc>

Criminal Justice System

State and Territory leaders agreed that from 20 March 2020 each State’s and Territory’s adult correctional system will restructure personal prison visits to help manage the risk posed to prisoners and staff by the introduction of COVID-19 into custodial facilities. Depending on their operational needs, this may include stopping visits in some jurisdictions.

Other measures

Aged Care Workforce Continuity

As the transmission of COVID-19 increases rapidly, it is our priority to protect and support elderly and vulnerable Australians.

Aged care is a critical sector that faces staffing challenges as existing staff are either subject to self-isolation requirements due to COVID-19 or are unable to attend work.

Building on the package of measures announced earlier this week, the Commonwealth Government is announcing four temporary measures designed to support the aged care workforce with \$444.6 million worth of funding from the Commonwealth to:

- Provide \$234.9 million for a COVID-19 ‘retention bonus’ to ensure the continuity of the workforce for staff in both residential and home care.
- Provide \$78.3 million in additional funding for residential care to support continuity of workforce supply.
- Provide \$26.9 million to supplement the viability of residential aged care facilities (including National Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Program and Multi-Purpose Services and homeless providers).
- Deliver \$92.2 million in additional support to home care providers and organisations which deliver the Commonwealth Home Support Program, including for services such as meals on wheels
- An extra \$12.3 million to support the myAgedcare service to respond to the needs of older Australia.

The National Cabinet agreed that states and territories will issue nationally consistent public health directions on visitor restrictions for aged care facilities to complement regulatory standards adopted by the Commonwealth.

Consistent legal directions across states and territories will support public confidence and reduce confusion. Australians are receiving their advice through a range of channels, including national and local media, therefore consistency of messaging and language across jurisdictions is important.