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Got plans? COVID doesn't care: Kiwis reminded to check their risk ahead of holiday season

- *Around 1 million Kiwis are at high risk of severe COVID-19.^{1,2}*
- *It's important to know if you're at higher risk of COVID-19 making you very sick, ending up in hospital or even dying – so you can take action if you test positive. People with high-risk factors are at increased risk of getting severe illness.³*

AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND, 18 September 2024 – Pfizer New Zealand launched a new COVID-19 awareness campaign today to remind Kiwis, ahead of summer, to check if they are at increased risk of getting severe COVID-19.

The *'Got plans? COVID doesn't care'* campaign highlights the importance of knowing if you are at higher risk of a severe COVID-19 infection, so you can take action if you test positive. The campaign is a timely reminder as New Zealanders head into summer, as previous years have demonstrated increased COVID-19 infection rates ahead of the holidays.⁴

There are a range of factors that put people at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19. These include being over 65 years of age, having a health condition, such as heart disease, diabetes, or a chronic respiratory condition, being immunocompromised, or being of Māori or Pasifika ethnicity.³

“Viral respiratory illnesses like COVID-19 do not show much seasonality – unlike the flu virus – and can therefore be easily overlooked as we approach summer months as we tend to think that respiratory viruses disappear in warm weather,” said Dr Hasan Bhally, an infectious disease specialist at Waitemata DHB in Auckland.

“Catching COVID-19 during this festive period can disrupt your plans due to disabling symptoms and may increase the risk of spreading the virus to your friends, family and the general public.”

Health New Zealand Te Whatu Ora data reported a seven-day rolling new case average of 136 new cases in week of 8 September 2024.⁵ By comparison, the seven-day rolling average of new infections in mid-November 2023 during New Zealand's fifth COVID wave was 849.⁶

Dr Bhally added: “Despite the scientific developments in the last three years, with the ease of self-testing, availability of vaccine boosters, antiviral medications and an overall global decline in the severity of COVID-19, it is still important to appreciate that consequences of COVID-19 extend beyond the respiratory (breathing) system – especially in the elderly and those with other immune system problems. COVID-19 can cause complications related to the heart, and overall physical/mental wellbeing.”

Krishan Thiru, Medical Director at Pfizer Australia & New Zealand, said that in summer we spend more time mingling with friends and family and travelling overseas, which increases the transmission potential for COVID-19.



“As in previous years, we expect another surge in COVID-19 cases as summer holidays approach. Staying up to date with recommended vaccinations, gathering in well-ventilated spaces, and knowing your eligibility for antivirals are all important precautions,” Dr Thiru said.

“If you’re one of the almost one in five New Zealanders at risk of serious illness from COVID-19,^{1,2} you may be eligible for antiviral medicines. But oral antiviral treatment needs to be commenced as soon as possible after testing positive for COVID-19 and within five days of symptoms starting. So, if you test positive, you need to act quickly – don’t wait for worsening symptoms. It’s a good idea to talk to your healthcare provider now, before you get sick.”

New Zealanders can check if they are at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 and their eligibility for oral antiviral medicines at [knowmyrisk.co.nz](https://www.knowmyrisk.co.nz).

Eligible New Zealanders can get timely access to oral antivirals through advance prescriptions. Those people who are at high risk of a severe COVID-19 infection, who may be planning travel around New Zealand, should consider an advanced prescription to take with them as it might be difficult to contact their usual healthcare provider. Those at higher risk who live in remote or rural areas may also benefit from an advanced prescription. Advance prescriptions are valid for 90 days and may be available from your healthcare provider following an in-person or telehealth consultation. Talk to your healthcare provider for more information regarding advance prescription.

Alternatively, oral antivirals are available via private prescription for those individuals who do not meet Pharmac’s access criteria but may still benefit from treatment.

Vaccines and medicines have risk and benefits. Talk to your healthcare provider to see if this vaccine or medicine is right for you.

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