

MEDIA RELEASE

29 March 2020

COVID-19: Recent overseas travellers urged to get a free assessment if they develop COVID-19 symptoms

Nelson Marlborough Health (NMH) Clinical Director of Public Health Dr Stephen Bridgman urges anyone in the region who has returned from overseas in the past 14 days, or who has been in close contact with someone who has, to seek urgent medical advice from a community-based assessment centre as soon as they develop even the mildest of COVID-19 symptoms.

As at 29 March, all 18 confirmed cases and 1 probable case of COVID-19 in the Nelson Marlborough region are related to travel. 11 of the 18 confirmed cases are primary cases. Primary cases are people who have returned from overseas. The remaining seven cases are secondary cases – people who have been in close contact with primary cases.

NMH Clinical Director of Public Health Dr Stephen Bridgman explains why it is important for recent travellers and their close contacts to proactively seek medical advice at this point of time:

“People who have returned from overseas, or who are close contacts of those who have, might be feeling quite healthy, but be incubating the virus. Or they may only be experiencing mild cold-like symptoms.

“It’s understandable why people who have mild respiratory symptoms – such as a congested or runny nose, sneezing, a sore throat or cough – might not seek advice. But if you are having mild symptoms and have returned recently from overseas you may be infecting your close contacts with the virus.

“By assessing someone as soon as symptoms start, we have the best chance of preventing spread of the virus among close contacts. It will also help prevent a local community outbreak.

“Therefore, in these exceptional times anyone who has been travelling overseas and develops even mild cold like symptoms should seek assessment as soon as possible,” Dr Bridgman says.

Dr Bridgman says that, given all cases to date in Nelson Marlborough are travel-related, it is crucial that anybody who has been overseas in the last 14 days follows the Government’s self-isolation rules, as they are a high-risk group for COVID-19.

“While there is no proof yet of community transmission of COVID-19 in the Nelson Marlborough region yet, this is a real risk and we urge all residents to comply with the Government’s ‘Level 4’ isolation and physical distancing rules, to prevent a community outbreak.”

Dr Bridgman thanks all confirmed cases and their families for their cooperation and help through the contact tracing process.

“The people who have been unlucky enough to be caught up in this pandemic have been incredibly helpful to the Public Health Service team, in particular in identifying close contacts and remaining in self-isolation.”

NMH Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr Nick Baker says the community-based assessment centres are set up to support travellers and their close contacts.

“Wherever they are in the region, travellers and close contacts who develop symptoms they should seek urgent medical advice from a community-based assessment centre,” Dr Baker says.

“NMH has three well-established community-based assessment centres, with a fourth one opening on Monday, in Nelson, Blenheim and Motueka.

“The centres are free of charge and make it easy for recently-returned travellers and their close contacts to get assessed, and tested if required. These two groups of people can either phone or attend a CBAC directly. They can also be referred to a CBAC by a GP or Healthline clinician.”

“If you have been overseas in the past 14 days, or been in close contact with someone who has – please call a centre on 0800 358 4636 for advice. You don’t need to call your GP or Healthline first. You can also go to a CBAC directly, but there might be a wait to be seen – phoning the CBAC ahead of going there will save you time as the first part of the process can be done on the phone,” Dr Nick Baker says.

Other people who fall outside of the ‘travel’ or ‘close contact of travel’ categories are still asked to phone their GP or Healthline first, to see if they should attend a centre for assessment.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

What is a community-based assessment centre (CBAC)?

A community-based assessment centre (CBAC) is where you can get assessed for COVID-19. You might also be tested for COVID-19. There is no fee for this service.

What is the difference between ‘screening’, ‘assessment’ and ‘testing’?

All people who attend, or phone a CBAC are screened and most will be assessed. Not everyone is tested however.

Screening: If someone has concerns that they might have COVID-19, they can call a CBAC, GP or Healthline and they will be asked screening questions. If they attend a CBAC they will also be screened by a clinician outside the building.

The screening questions focus on a person’s:

- travel history or close contact with people who have travelled
- any close contact with people who have, or who may have, COVID-19
- symptoms.

Assessment: The clinician who has done the screening outside the building will determine if an assessment is needed. This happens inside the CBAC, with the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) in use.

Testing: If the clinician who has done the assessment determines that a test is needed, a swab (sample) will be taken from the person and sent to a laboratory for testing. It is very important that anyone who has had a swab taken remains in careful isolation and follows the physical distancing rules.

What is a close contact?

A close contact is defined as any person who has been exposed to a suspect, confirmed or probable case during the time the case (person) is infectious, without the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). The most typical exposure for members of the public are:

- living in the same household or household-like setting (eg, shared section of in a hostel) with a case
- face-to-face contact in any setting within two metres of a case for 15 minutes or more
- having been in a closed environment (e.g. a classroom, hospital waiting room, or conveyance other than aircraft) within 2 metres of a case for 15 minutes or more

Other types of exposure are listed on the Ministry of Health's website: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-health-advice-general-public/contact-tracing-covid-19>

Where are the centres?

There are two community-based assessment centres in Nelson, one in Motueka and one in Blenheim. One of the two Nelson CBACs opens on Monday 30 March.

People in Picton, Golden Bay and Murchison can be screened and assessed by their local general practice in specially-designated spaces for the safe assessment of people with COVID-19 concerns away from other people in health centre waiting rooms.

Details of the centres and sites are listed on the NMH website COVID-19 page: <https://www.nmdhb.govt.nz/covid-19/>

New centre opens in Nelson Monday 30 March

A second CBAC will be open from 30 March in Toi Toi (Victory), in the Harvey Norman carpark.

At the Toi Toi centre people will be screened and assessed. If they need testing this will happen at the Tahunanui CBAC and transport will be available if needed.

Staff at the Toi Toi CBAC can also connect people to welfare support: Accommodation, food, personal and whānau safety, financial and social support.

How can I raise concerns about non-compliance with isolation and physical distancing? First, have a polite conversation with the person and remind them of the isolation and physical distancing rules. Kindness counts – people may not be clear on the rules so do your best to explain it to them in a respectful way.

If this is not successful or you are not confident having this kind of conversation, consider:

- i) Emailing the Ministry of Health: NHCCselfisolation@health.govt.nz
- ii) Using the NZ Police non-emergency 105 service: File a report online or phone 105: <https://www.police.govt.nz/105support>

ENDS

Contact:

Stephanie Gray, Communications Manager, Nelson Marlborough Health
03 546 1824 / 027 4466 799 / stephanie.gray@nmdhb.govt.nz