

Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's statement – 14 December 2021

Statement given by the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon to the Scottish Parliament,

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-update-first-ministers-statement-14-december-2021/>

Key points

The first minister wants to slow down the spread of the Omicron variant while the booster vaccine programme is being ramped up and has set out further protective measures to prevent its spread. People are urged to book their booster jags as soon as possible, as early evidence suggests protection against Omicron is much lower with just two vaccine doses.

The Omicron variant today makes up 27.5% of cases in Scotland, an increase from 15% on Friday. It is estimated that the doubling time is two to three days - more rapid than anything experienced in the pandemic so far

Even if the effects of Omicron are milder than Delta, "simple arithmetic" means the challenge it poses will still be very significant.

Cases in Scotland in total have increased by a quarter in the past week in all age groups, except the over 85s. Omicron is already contributing to that increase.

Omicron is a much more transmissible infection - even if milder in terms of severe illness - can still place a much bigger burden on the NHS.

Everyone needs to think again in terms of a race between the virus and the vaccines.

46% of the over 12 population have had booster jags already. Steps now being taken to get boosters into arms much faster.

Getting fully vaccinated is the best thing any of us can do to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and the country. So please, book your booster jag as soon as possible.

Speeding up vaccination is essential the FM wants to assure the nation today that it is the government's top priority.

To slow down Omicron, some further protective measures are proposed and the FM appealed to everyone to follow today's advice.

Businesses will have legal requirement to take measures which are reasonably practicable to minimise the risk of transmission.

- In retail, it will involve a return to the kind of protections such as physical distancing and measures to control the flow of customers and protective screens.
- For hospitality, it will mean measures to avoid crowding at bars and between tables, and a reminder of the requirement to collect customer contact details to help with contact tracing
- Guidance will be issued for different sectors later this week.

- Guidance will also make clear that it is now a legal duty for employers to enable staff who were working from home at the start of the pandemic to do so again
- People who cannot work from home – for example those who work in manufacturing, hospitality and key public services are asked to test regularly before going to work.
- Workplace testing scheme, which delivers lateral flow kits twice a week to all businesses who have signed up to it is extended.
- Rules and public health messaging on the importance of wearing face coverings and wearing them properly are also to be reinforced.

Household mixing is not being banned or restricted in law as before. We understand the negative impact this has on mental health and wellbeing. However, everyone is asked to cut down as far as possible the number of people outside their own households that they interact with to help break transmission chains.

- Before and immediately after Christmas, please minimise your social mixing with other households as much as you can.
- If you plan to socialise - either at home or in indoor public places - limit the number of households represented in your group to a maximum of three. And make sure you test before you go.
- For Christmas gatherings, the FM is not asking you to cancel or change your plans, and we are not proposing limits on the size of household gatherings.
- Places of worship will also remain open, with appropriate mitigations.
- Guidance will be issued to help you make Christmas safer.
 - Reduce your contacts in advance of and after Christmas
 - Keeping your celebrations as small as your family circumstances allow
 - Make sure everyone in your gathering is vaccinated and has done a test in advance.
 - Keep rooms ventilated and follow strict hygiene rules.

Many of the protections that help curtail COVID come at a financial cost to individuals and businesses - so wherever we can, we **put in place financial packages** to protect people's health, jobs and livelihoods.

- £100 million Scottish Government Funds will be used to help businesses, mainly those in hospitality and food supply, and in the culture sector
- An additional £100 million to ensure the Self Isolation Support Grant is available for those who need it, given the expected increase in the number of eligible people who will be asked to isolate.

The delivery of booster vaccinations to speed up delivery of booster vaccinations.

- Anyone aged between 40 and 60 who hasn't already booked an appointment, has now received an invitation to do so.

- Since 13 December all 30 to 39 year olds have been able to book their booster jags online.
- 18 to 29 year olds will be able to book online from t15 December.
- Our aim is that by 31 December everyone over 18 will have been able to book a booster appointment.
- It is not possible to guarantee that absolutely everyone over 18 will have been vaccinated by 31 December. For a variety of reasons, some appointments will run into the new year.

Steps are being taken to create the additional capacity needed.

- The COVID booster programme will be prioritise over the remainder of the flu vaccination programme for the next few weeks to allow more booster appointments to be available.
- The requirement for people to wait in a vaccine centre for 15 minutes after they receive an mRNA vaccine is being removed. This will speed up vaccination times and enable many more appointments.
- Health boards are working to offer additional drop-in capacity within local centres.
- The number and role of volunteers will be extended, to ensure that clinical staff can spend as much time as possible supporting the administration of vaccines.
- We will continue to expand the size of the overall vaccination workforce as much as possible and make full use of any military support that is available.

In the new year, we will also complete second vaccination doses for 12 to 17 year olds and hope we might also soon get regulatory approval to offer vaccination to under 12s.

To reiterate the changed advice on self isolation.

- For now, household contacts of a person who tests positive for COVID, are being advised to self-isolate for 10 days. This advice applies to everyone in a household regardless of age, vaccination status or PCR test result.
- Businesses and organisations providing vital services can apply for an exemption to allow essential workers to return to work, subject to them being symptom free and taking certain precautions, including daily lateral flow tests.
- We are not recommending that entire school classes are required to isolate when a pupil tests positive. The advice on school isolation will continue to be risk-based. A key aim is to ensure that schools stay open if at all possible, to minimise further disruption to education.
- However, it is vital that schools are safe for pupils and staff. Secondary school pupils and all staff continue to be asked to take lateral flow tests regularly – including during holidays and before returning after the break - and to wear face coverings.

We will continue to consider appropriate protective measures for people in institutional settings – such as care homes – while ensuring that visits can continue.

- Last week we recommended that care staff take lateral flow tests on a daily basis.
- We are also now recommending that individual visits in care homes should not involve any more than two households visiting any patient at a time. And we are asking anyone visiting a care home to test before every visit.
- For hospitals, we are recommending that no more than two people visit a patient at any one time. And again, we are recommending a lateral flow test before each visit.

In summary

- please get fully vaccinated as soon as possible.
- please test regularly.
- If you are going to meet other people - and our advice, remember, is to minimise this as much as possible - take a lateral flow test before you go, every time.
- Wear face coverings on public transport, in shops, and when moving about in hospitality settings. And make sure your face covering fully covers your mouth and nose.
- Keep windows open if meeting people indoors – even at this time of year.
- Follow all advice on hygiene.
- Work from home whenever possible - this will soon become a requirement anchored in law.

And please follow the new advice outlined today.

- Cut down unnecessary contacts as much as possible. In the run up to and immediately after Christmas, please avoid socialising with people in other households as much as you can.
- If you are socialising indoors at home or in public places, limit the number of households represented in your group to a maximum of three. And test before you go.
- And please follow the advice we will give to keep Christmas Day as normal but as safe as possible.