

**From: Chief Pharmaceutical Officer
Mrs Cathy Harrison**



To: All Community Pharmacy Contractors

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Dear Colleague,

PROTECTING COMMUNITY PHARMACY TEAMS

I understand that many of you are worried about the potential impact of a further pandemic wave and will be starting to make plans for the coming winter months. To help you prepare your businesses and continue to protect your staff I am writing to remind you of the importance of maintaining social distancing wherever possible, appropriate use of PPE in line with [current Public Health England guidance](#), which was updated on 21st August 2020, and effective infection control through regular handwashing and cleaning of surfaces. In addition I wanted to update you on the current position relating to face coverings, the Test, Trace and Protect strategy and StopCovid NI Proximity App.

Face coverings

Members of the public must wear face coverings when in enclosed settings where social distancing cannot be maintained. This became a mandatory requirement from Monday 10 August 2020 with the enactment of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. This requirement includes not only public transport or retail environments, but also any other settings where interactions with individuals from other households take place, including domestic settings and healthcare environments such as pharmacies.

Implications for community pharmacy

The main implications of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 for community pharmacy teams include:

- Face coverings do not mean a surgical or other medical grade mask, but a covering of the mouth and nose that is made of cloth or other textiles and through

which you can breathe, for example a scarf or religious head covering that covers the mouth and nose.

- Pharmacy teams do not need to provide surgical or other medical grade masks from their own PPE stocks to patients who present with cloth or textile face coverings.
- It is not compulsory for a member of staff in a pharmacy to wear face coverings (but pharmacy staff should continue to refer to current public health guidance on the use of PPE in pharmacies);
- Certain people are exempt from the requirements, for example, children under the age of 13;
- There are reasonable excuses for not wearing a face covering, which include a person who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of any physical or mental illness or impairment, or because of a disability within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, or those who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering without severe distress;
- If asked by a pharmacy staff member, a person in the pharmacy may remove their face covering in order to assist in the provision of healthcare or healthcare advice;
- A face covering can be removed to take medication, e.g. to consume methadone in a pharmacy.

If a person enters the pharmacy without wearing a mask and does not have a reasonable excuse they may be asked to leave the premises. However, pharmacy staff should consider the health needs of patients and so people should not be automatically refused treatment.

To support public messaging about the requirement to wear face coverings indoors, the Executive has produced a range of [COVID-19 information posters](#), including a specific face coverings poster for pharmacies. The Health and Social Care Board are arranging for printing and distribution of these posters to community pharmacies and these will be delivered in the coming days.

'Test, Trace and Protect'

The ['Test, Trace and Protect' strategy](#) is part of Northern Ireland's public health approach to containing and controlling COVID-19 and to reducing transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the community in Northern Ireland. This strategy and the associated contact tracing service are central to ensuring that we interrupt and reduce transmission as we move into further phases of the pandemic response. The key elements of the strategy are

- Rapid identification and proactive testing of all people with symptoms of COVID-19,

- Effective contact tracing of people who have been in close contact with cases, and;
- Provision of support to enable contacts of cases to self-isolate for the required period of time.

Implications for community pharmacy teams

Where a member of the pharmacy team has tested positive for COVID-19 any potential contacts, including people they work with, will be identified via assessment by a trained contact tracer. Individual contacts are identified as being high risk, low risk or no risk. High risk is considered as:

- Close contact (within 2 metres) with a confirmed case and having spent more than 15 minutes with them without any personal protection;
- Face-to-face contact within 1 metre with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19, including being coughed on, having a face to face conversation, or having skin-to-skin physical contact;
- Any contact within 1 metre for 1 minute or longer without face to face contact.

The result of this assessment will also take into consideration any additional circumstances in the workplace such as the use of PPE, protective screens and adherence to social distancing which, if correctly followed, may not be regarded as a close contact for these purposes.

Individuals who have been identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive will be asked to self-isolate for 14 days. If a single member of staff tests positive, it is not the case that the whole workforce will automatically have to self-isolate; only those members of staff who have been identified as being in close recent contact with the positive case following assessment by a trained contact tracer would be asked to self-isolate.

I understand that asking people to isolate in this way is not easy, and that the impact of contact tracing has already been felt by some of you and your teams. While the Department and HSCB will continue to work with the PHA to minimise the impact of contact tracing on community pharmacy services, successfully reducing the rate of COVID-19 transmission depends on everyone in society continuing to play their part and complying with the advice issued by the contact tracing team.

This is why it is so important that all preventative measures including adherence to social distancing, optimal hand hygiene, frequent surface decontamination, ventilation and other measures are adhered to in order to mitigate against the potential for having to close a pharmacy in the event of a positive case, and that pharmacies have business continuity plans in place to manage any temporary closures.

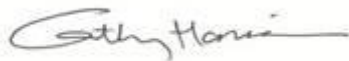
StopCovid NI Proximity App

The [StopCovid NI Proximity App](#) has been designed to complement the manual contact tracing process by anonymously contacting people who have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 who may not be known to the person who caught the virus, such as when using public transport. The app is interoperable with the one used in the Republic of Ireland and is also highly likely to be compatible with apps introduced in future across the UK and Europe. It uses only anonymised information in its operation to safeguard user privacy.

Since launch on 31 July the app has been downloaded over 300,000 times however the more people that use the app, the more protection it gives us all, so I would encourage those of you who have not yet downloaded the app to do so and for those who have downloaded it to encourage your friends, family, customers and colleagues to do so. The StopCovid NI Proximity App can be downloaded from the Apple App Store and Google Play.

During the pandemic the community pharmacy network has demonstrated its ability to adapt, flex and overcome the immense challenges that have been presented during this time. That is a testimony to the professionalism and dedication of you and your teams and will be an invaluable component of the plans to rebuild the HSC while preparing for a further wave of COVID-19.

Yours sincerely



Mrs Cathy Harrison

CC: Joe Brogan, HSCB
Gerard Greene, CPNI