

5th January 2020

Deputy Holly Cairns
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: PQ 41056/20 To ask the Minister for Health the mechanism by which the close contacts of a person who has tested positive for Covid-19 are informed of same; the timeframe it takes for close contacts to be informed on average after the diagnosis is made; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Cairns,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response.

I wish to apologise for the delay in issuing a response to your above question.

Due to the current demands of the Covid-19 pandemic and the numerous queries we have received to date it has taken longer than I would have liked to respond.

Contact tracing involves contacting the person who gets a laboratory confirmed positive result (the case) and everyone they have been in contact with since 48 hours before their symptom onset (close contacts). Our target is to reach all close contacts within 24 hours.

Since March there have been a variety of system and process improvements designed to improve both the timeliness and quality of the contact tracing calls. I have included these below:

- Contact tracing operates seven days per week from 8am until 8pm.
- Contact tracing centres operate around the country reducing the risk of a Covid outbreak impacting capacity.
- Contact Tracing is carried out in Galway, Limerick, Cork, and Dublin.
- Laboratory results are uploaded to the Covid Care Tracker every hour from 8am until 9pm, seven days per week. This improves the timeliness of results notification and contact tracing.
- Confirmed cases receive an SMS message as soon as their result is loaded onto the Covid Care Tracker, and in advance of receipt of a contact tracing call. This ensures they know their result as soon as possible.
- All close contacts of confirmed cases receive an SMS message advising them that they are a contact of a confirmed case as soon as their details are entered onto the Covid Care Tracker, and requesting that they restrict their movements. This ensures that contacts restrict their movements as quickly as possible and ahead of the contact tracing call.
- As part of the national Test and Trace system, the HSE has implemented standing and surge capacity.
- The Contact Management Programme has a very well developed and public health lead training team that ensures all contact tracers receive the appropriate level of training before making calls to the general public.
- The Covid Care Tracker system has undergone multiple software releases to improve the efficiency and accuracy of the process.

- The HSE has a suite of performance measures, against which each stage in the pathway from referral for a test to contact tracing completion is measured.

The HSE monitors performance on a daily basis, and the median time to complete all contact tracing calls from 14th – 20th December is currently 0.7 days. Due to the unprecedented level of Covid 19 transmission in the community prior to and after Christmas, NPHET advised on 31st December that we would no longer conduct automatic close contact testing and all close contacts were required to self-isolate for 14 days and assume they have Covid19. People who were experiencing symptoms can call their GP and arrange a test, Close contacts in outbreak settings are also still tested. Significant levels of service reconfiguration was undertaken in the Contact Management Programme at very short notice as demand exceeded all worst case scenarios modelled – with the contact tracing service in peak escalation since before Christmas and with 1,426 detected cases on Christmas Eve. All staff in the Contact Management Programme and at every Contact Tracing Centre have worked incredibly hard to meet service needs and at huge personal sacrifices over the Christmas period. On the 4th January the service made 7,519 calls to detected cases – an incredible achievement.

There will always be a percentage of cases or contacts who are not contactable, or for whom incorrect contact information is available. The HSE seeks to continuously improve our data capture and our contact tracing completion, so as to have the maximum impact on the virus.

I trust this information is of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,



Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead Testing and Tracing