

14th April 2021

Deputy Róisín Shortall
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

PQ 18028/21 “To ask the Minister for Health the percentage of positive cases for Covid-19 that are contact traced; the number of days on average that contact tracing goes back to; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”

Dear Deputy Shortall,

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

The Contact Management Programme (CMP) was established by the HSE in March 2020 to support the HSE's Departments of Public Health by notifying results to people tested for Covid-19 (or a nominated person), and to identify and manage contacts of people known to have Covid-19. This consists of four steps:

1. Informing the case about their diagnosis
2. Collecting data on close and complex contacts of the confirmed case
3. Advising close contacts of appropriate management
4. Undertaking active follow-up of close contacts which includes daily contact by SMS and referral for SARS-CoV-2 test

In response to your question in relation to the percentage of positive cases for Covid-19 that are contact traced please note the following. Since 17th March 2020, 95% (245,620 out of 257,651) of those with a positive result uploaded to the HSE's CovidCare tracker system have been contact traced. A small percentage (5%) are uncontactable (this can be due to a variety of reasons such as incorrect phone number, a person may decide not to answer the phone, they may be too ill to talk to a Contact Tracer, or in some cases the person may have sadly passed away. Please note this was more likely to be the case in the early days of the establishment of the CMP and the commencement of contact tracing. We have become more successful at reaching people as technology has improved etc. More recent data would suggest 97% of those with a positive result are contact traced.

Please note that the records on the Contact Tracing Database (Covid Care Tracker) is always slightly higher than the number of cases reported by HPSC daily. This is as a certain amount of records may be sequential positive results and are counted as multiple cases. The validation process of multiple records happens at a later stage hence the HPSC figures are used for official case numbers.

I wish to confirm the number of days that contact tracing goes back was a 48 hour period, which was the standard lookback period for contact tracing up to 31st March 2021. However, as of Wednesday 31st March, case source investigation (also known as backwards tracing) was introduced by the National Test and Trace Programme as part of an enhanced testing and tracing service. It has been possible to introduce case source investigation at this time as the number of cases are relatively stable at present. 80% of cases of Covid-19 are traced to a specific source through our Contact Tracing Centres or through HSE Public Health Teams. The remaining 20 per cent are classified as cases of community transmission. Public Health often re-classify these cases when they have the opportunity to contact the case again. This frequently reduces the 20 per cent community transmission figure and is important in terms of identifying more specific sources associated with outbreaks or clusters.

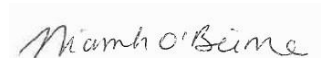
To support source identification efforts contact tracers ask people with Covid-19, who are classified as cases of community transmission, extra questions about events or places they were at in the previous seven days before their symptoms began. If the confirmed case did not have symptoms, contact tracers will ask about events or places they were at, the week before the day of their Covid-19 test.

Source investigation is a core Public Health function in the investigation and control of outbreaks of communicable diseases. Conducting this activity, as standard, with the support of the contact tracers, aims to identify where transmission may have occurred in more cases. We can use this information where possible to interrupt the chains of transmission. It will provide real-time information about events and situations of where the virus is spreading to Public Health teams via our Contact Tracing service. Public Health teams may then decide to offer testing to people that were at the same venue or setting at the same time as the case, to stop further spread of disease and prevent clusters of Covid-19 developing in the community.

This type of investigation works better when overall case numbers and community transmission is at lower levels. The HSE will continue to monitor the situation in terms of the benefit of this process from a Public Health perspective.

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,



Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead Testing and Tracing