

Frequently asked questions relating to COVID-19 and pharmacy staff

This advice aims to draw on the current sources of information from the HSE, HPSC and others to answer questions arising for pharmacies and pharmacy staff.

1. Advice for staff members in “extremely medically vulnerable” categories

Staff members in one or more of these categories are currently advised to **cocoon**. They should not work outside their home while this restriction is in place. If the staff member is in doubt about whether they meet this criteria, they should seek advice from their doctor.

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/cocooning.html>

2. Advice for staff members at increased risk but not in category above

Staff members in these categories are currently advised that they may work outside the home. An assessment of tasks and workplace may be necessary and the staff member may be moved to different tasks or work location if this is possible and necessary. If the staff member is in doubt about their level of risk, they should seek advice from their doctor.

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/at-risk-groups.html>

3. Advice for staff members with symptoms

Any staff member developing a fever or cough or shortness of breath/breathing difficulties must go home immediately and phone their GP, or HSE Live if they have no GP. They must follow **self-isolation** guidelines. The staff member must stay home for 14 days after first symptoms and 5 days after last fever, whichever is longer.

4. Advice for other staff members if a staff member goes home with symptoms

Staff members who were in close contact with an affected staff member but have not been contacted by public health or contact tracing should follow guidance for the general public, i.e. further restricted movement is not necessary. They should self-monitor for symptoms. If they develop symptoms, follow guidance in point 3 above.

5. Advice for staff members if contacted by public health and advised they are close contacts of a confirmed case

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/self-isolation-and-limited-social-interaction.html>

Following a positive test result for COVID-19, the person is contacted by a contact tracer and their movements and contacts are determined. Their contacts will be notified by a contact tracer. If you are a contact, you will be informed whether you are a close or casual contact, what that means and what precautions you should take. Only contact tracers will issue this advice. More information about contact tracing, including advice for close contacts, is available on

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/contacttracingguidance/>

A close contact includes:

- Any individual who has had greater than 15 minutes face-to-face (less than 2 metres distance) contact with a case, in any setting.
- Any individual living in the same house or shared accommodation as a case.

Contact needs to have occurred during the infectious period, defined as **from 48 hours before symptom onset in the case, until the case is classified as no longer infectious by the treating team (usually 5 days fever free AND 14 days from symptom onset** but may be longer in severely ill cases who are hospitalised).

Staff members advised by public health or contact tracing that they are close contacts of a confirmed case must go home immediately and follow **restricted movements** guidance for 14 days. If they develop symptoms during that time, they must follow self-isolation guidelines, phone their GP, or HSE Live if they have no GP. The staff member must stay home for 14 days after first symptoms and 5 days after last fever, whichever is longer.

6. Advice for staff members if contacted by public health and advised they are casual contacts of a confirmed case

Staff members advised by public health or contact tracing that they are casual contacts of a confirmed case may continue to work. They should self-monitor for symptoms. If they develop symptoms, follow guidance in point 3 above.

7. Are pharmacists and pharmacy staff considered a priority group for COVID-19 testing?

Healthcare workers “who are in the frontline and have regular patient contact” are in a priority group for COVID-19 testing. <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/testing.html#Priority-groups> The Department of Health has confirmed to the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland that, in the context of testing, this includes community pharmacists. Pharmacy staff should inform their GP that they work in a pharmacy.

Pharmacy services are essential services <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dfef8f-list-of-essential-service-providers-under-new-public-health-guidelin/> under current guidelines, meaning that staff may travel to work to deliver this essential service.

8. The pharmacy I work in exercises social distancing between staff. Are we therefore considered casual contacts as opposed to close contact?

Efforts to minimise the risk of transmission between staff, including social distancing, hand hygiene, cleaning shared equipment and spaces and respiratory hygiene, are recommended.

Public health and contact tracing will provide recommendations on a case by case basis. If the affected staff member has not been in contact with any individual for greater than 15 minutes face-to-face (less than 2 metres distance), from 48 hours before first symptoms until 14 days after symptoms, there may be no close contacts identified in the pharmacy.

9. Should pharmacy staff wear face masks?

New HPSC guidance, Guidance on the use of Surgical Masks in the Healthcare Setting in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, is now available on:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/ppe/useofsurgicalmasksinhealthcaresetting/>

This guidance applies to pharmacy staff and in pharmacy settings (HPSC, 22nd April 2020):

- Surgical masks should be worn by healthcare workers when providing care to patients within 2m of a patient, regardless of the COVID-19 status of the patient.
- Surgical masks should be worn by all healthcare workers for all encounters, of 15 minutes or more, with other healthcare workers in the workplace where a distance of 2m cannot be maintained.

Surgical masks are surgical face masks Fluid Resistant Type 11R.

All staff should follow guidance on <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/protect-yourself.html> for hand hygiene, social distancing and respiratory etiquette, both in dealing with patients and customers and in the workplace. These measures are very effective and important. Use of a surgical mask is in addition to and not as a replacement for the other measures to reduce the risk of transmission of infection.

How to put on and wear a face mask properly

Do

- Clean your hands properly before you put it on.
- Cover your mouth and nose with the mask
- Press the metal band so that it conforms to the bridge of your nose
- Make sure there are no gaps between your face and the mask.
- Tie the mask securely. If there are strings, tie them high on top of the head to get a good fit.
- The mask should remain in place covering the nose and mouth throughout the period of use.
- Replace the mask as soon as it is damp or if you have to remove it for any reason.

Don't

- Do not touch the mask while wearing it – if you do, clean your hands properly.
- Do not use a damp or wet mask.
- Do not reuse a mask.
- Do not move the mask up and down over the nose and mouth.

Taking a mask off

- Remove it from behind – do not touch the front of the mask.
- Put it in a bin straight away. Dispose as healthcare risk waste if facilities are available. If a healthcare risk waste service is not available then put masks in a plastic rubbish bag. Tie the bag and place it in a second bag. Leave this bag for 72 hours in a secure location prior to disposal. Repeat this for each day's waste.
- Clean your hands properly

10. What is the difference between restricting movements and self-isolating?

See <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/self-isolation-and-limited-social-interaction.html>

Restricted movements

- Follow the advice for everybody – stay at home.
- Do not go to work, do not use public transport, do not have visitors at your home, do not visit others, even if you usually care for them. Keep away from older people, anyone with long-term medical conditions and pregnant women.
- Do not go to the shops or pharmacy unless it's absolutely necessary – where possible, order your groceries online or have some family or friends drop them off.
- You can still go outside to exercise briefly by yourself, but only within 2 kilometres of your home, keeping 2 metres distance from other people.
- If you develop symptoms, you will need to self-isolate.

Self-isolation

Self-isolation means staying indoors and completely avoiding contact with other people.

Do

- Stay at home, in a room with the window open if possible.
- Keep away from others in your home as much as you can. Use a separate bathroom if possible. If not possible, use the bathroom last and then clean it.
- Check your symptoms – phone your doctor if they get worse, if you have breathing difficulties or feel very unwell, or if you feel you need to.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes using a tissue – clean your hands properly afterwards.
- Wash your hands properly and often. Use your own towel – do not share a towel with others.
- Clean your room every day with a household cleaner or disinfectant.
- It's OK for friends, family or delivery drivers to drop off food or supplies. Make sure you're not in the same room as them, when they do.

Don't

- Do not go to work, school, religious services or public areas.
- Do not share any items you have used with other people.
- Do not use public transport or taxis.
- Do not invite visitors to your home.
- Keep away from older people, anyone with long-term medical conditions and pregnant women.

You can stop self-isolating only when both of these apply to you:

- you have had no fever for 5 days
- it has been 14 days since you first developed symptoms