

Friday, 17 July 2020

ESCALATING THE CORONAVIRUS FIGHT IN REGIONAL VICTORIA

Coronavirus testing will be stepped up across regional Victoria this week and a new Geelong-based public health team will be established to help slow the spread of the virus and provide the data we need to inform decisions about restrictions – as the Chief Health Officer expands his recommendation to wear a mask.

While coronavirus numbers are far lower in regional areas than metropolitan Melbourne, the Government is taking further action to ensure all Victorians remain vigilant against this highly infectious disease. Over the past two weeks there have been around 40 cases recorded across non-restricted LGAs.

To ensure we can protect regional Victoria, and continue to find as many coronavirus cases as possible, a suite of new or expanded testing sites will be established across regional Victoria to provide local residents with better access to testing.

The new and expanded sites are focusing on areas with higher case rates and recent cases, based on the public health advice. We will continue to monitor for any gaps and adjust our testing sites and locations as necessary including additional access planned for Gippsland and Ballarat.

Regional testing sites include:

- Campaspe: Echuca Regional Health has increased its staffing to flexibly meet testing demand.
- Bass Coast Health: Wonthaggi Hospital opening a drive-through site, open 9am-5pm, 7 days a week.
- Greater Bendigo: La Trobe University Rural Health School opening a drive-through site, open 10am-5pm, 7 days a week.
- Greater Shepparton: Goulburn Valley Health extending opening hours by 2 hours each day to run 8am – 6pm.
- Koo Wee Rup: A new testing site will be established at the Koo Wee Rup Community Centre, 255 Rossiter Road, starting from Monday 20th July and operating Mon, Wed and Friday, from 12:30pm-2:30pm.
- Mildura: The Mildura drive through has agreed to stay open to support local testing.

Overall there are more than 60 testing sites operating in regional LGAs and testing is also available at many local GP clinics.

All regional testing site locations can be found on the DHHS website, available through a testing site map. Some sites also allow you to check the estimated wait time to help inform your decision making.

In recognition of an increase in case numbers in the Geelong region, the first dedicated regional public health team has been established at Barwon Health – starting with 10 suitably qualified clinicians – to provide case management and contact tracing for regional cases and assist metro Melbourne teams where possible.

Preparations are also underway to set up further teams at Ballarat, Bendigo and Latrobe health services, Goulburn Valley Health and more regional locations as required, to respond to increasing cases and emerging trends.

As a further precaution we are now also encouraging regional Victorians over the age of 18 to use a face mask when they leave the house but cannot physically distance – such as on public transport or while shopping for essential supplies.

We've always said we'd continue to be guided by the medical advice – last month we announced we intended to ease restrictions on gaming and hospitality in regional Victoria – due to the number of positive cases all current restrictions will remain in place.

While the rates of coronavirus remain relatively low in the regions, the risks of spread from metro areas remain. If we can slow and contain the spread of the virus in regional areas with the help of masks and increased testing, we will keep our options for the regions open for the future.

For information about coronavirus or to find your nearest testing site visit coronavirus.vic.gov.au or call 1800 675 398.

Quotes attributable to Premier Daniel Andrews

“By putting a ring around metropolitan Melbourne, we’re protecting regional Victorians from this public health bushfire – but we also need to be aware of any emerging spot fires.”

“We’re increasing our testing in regional areas to find as many cases of this deadly virus as possible, and make sure we stop it in its tracks – which will provide us with more options when it comes to future restrictions.”

Quotes attributable to Minister for Health Jenny Mikakos

“Boosting our testing and contact tracing efforts in key regional areas will give us the best shot we have of preventing further spread of coronavirus across the whole state.”

“Like every Victorian, regional Victorians are not immune from this global pandemic. We need everyone, no matter where they live, to play their part: keep your distance, wash your hands - and if you've got symptoms, get tested.”