

Australia - For a better Festive Season, suppress COVID-19!

Australia's Chief Health Officers have expressed concern about the impact of COVID-19 waves on our community, particularly for people in high-risk groups. SARS-CoV-2 infection spreads rapidly and increases burden on our health care system. Ambulance services and emergency departments are strained (severely by some reports) and police are reported to be covering medical attendance in some jurisdictions. Surgeries and procedures can end up cancelled. There is a clear trend in increased excess deaths in 2022 directly and indirectly related to COVID.

Promoting and providing updated booster vaccinations to those most at risk is an important strategy to reduce the hospitalizations and deaths and to mitigate the impact of a wave on the health care system. Bivalent vaccines are available and many of those at risk are 6 months since their last dose, but ineligible for the bivalent vaccine because they have already had 4 doses.

Putting in place layers of mitigations to stop SARS-CoV-2 spread is critical to preserve our societal systems and save lives, suffering and a chronic burden of COVID-related disease. It is important to prevent infection even in the vaccinated, as complications can still occur, such as long Covid and post Covid cardiac and cerebrovascular events. Our future generations will be at increased risk for long term outcomes, such as neurological, cardiac and lung disease and so taking a precautionary stance and suppressing the next wave is far preferable to dealing with the devastating long-term effects.

To decrease risk of catching and spreading SARS-CoV-2, OzSAGE commends the recent Commonwealth health advice on wearing N95/ P2 high quality masks and funding for improved ventilation in schools. The stakeholder consultation occurring for Centre for Disease Control (CDC) under the Commonwealth is timely and welcome. A recently published Multi-national Delphi consensus to end the COVID-19 public health threat argues that government and community working together provides for more effective disease control.

To mitigate the risks of the next wave of COVID-19, OzSAGE recommends:

- Provide clear education on pathways for bivalent vaccine booster access
- Expand availability of bivalent booster to at risk people
- Consider recommending vaccines for children <5 years
- Reinstate the seven day isolation when someone is infected with COVID-19, with support if needed. If that is not feasible, N95/P2 high quality mask wear to exit on day 5 if symptomless. Rapid Antigen Testing if available is helpful
- Contacts of the infected person to wear N95/ P2 high quality masks in the community if they cannot isolate (also Rapid Antigen Test if available)
- Provide free N95/P2 respirators to community
- Ensure widespread access to affordable testing
- Reinstate mandatory reporting of positive tests in all jurisdictions
- Provide widespread multimedia education on how COVID-19 is spread and how people can best protect themselves from it

- Educate people on the value of ventilation and safe indoor air. This includes CO2 monitoring, to identify areas of poor indoor air quality, particularly in critical indoor areas such as childcare, schools and aged care facilities. Regulation of indoor air standards to decrease risk of airborne disease and support businesses and organizations to improve indoor air quality.
- Widen access to subsidised anti-viral medication for all adults 18 years and over. This may also help with prevention of Long Covid
- Review the sensitivity of current Rapid Antigen Tests in use, because there are anecdotal concerns for reduced sensitivity to newer variants
- Mitigate risk for large events. This can include holding events in outdoor air and Rapid Antigen Tests prior to the events, and other strategies as we have previously outlined

OzSAGE provides more detailed advice on these measures.

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