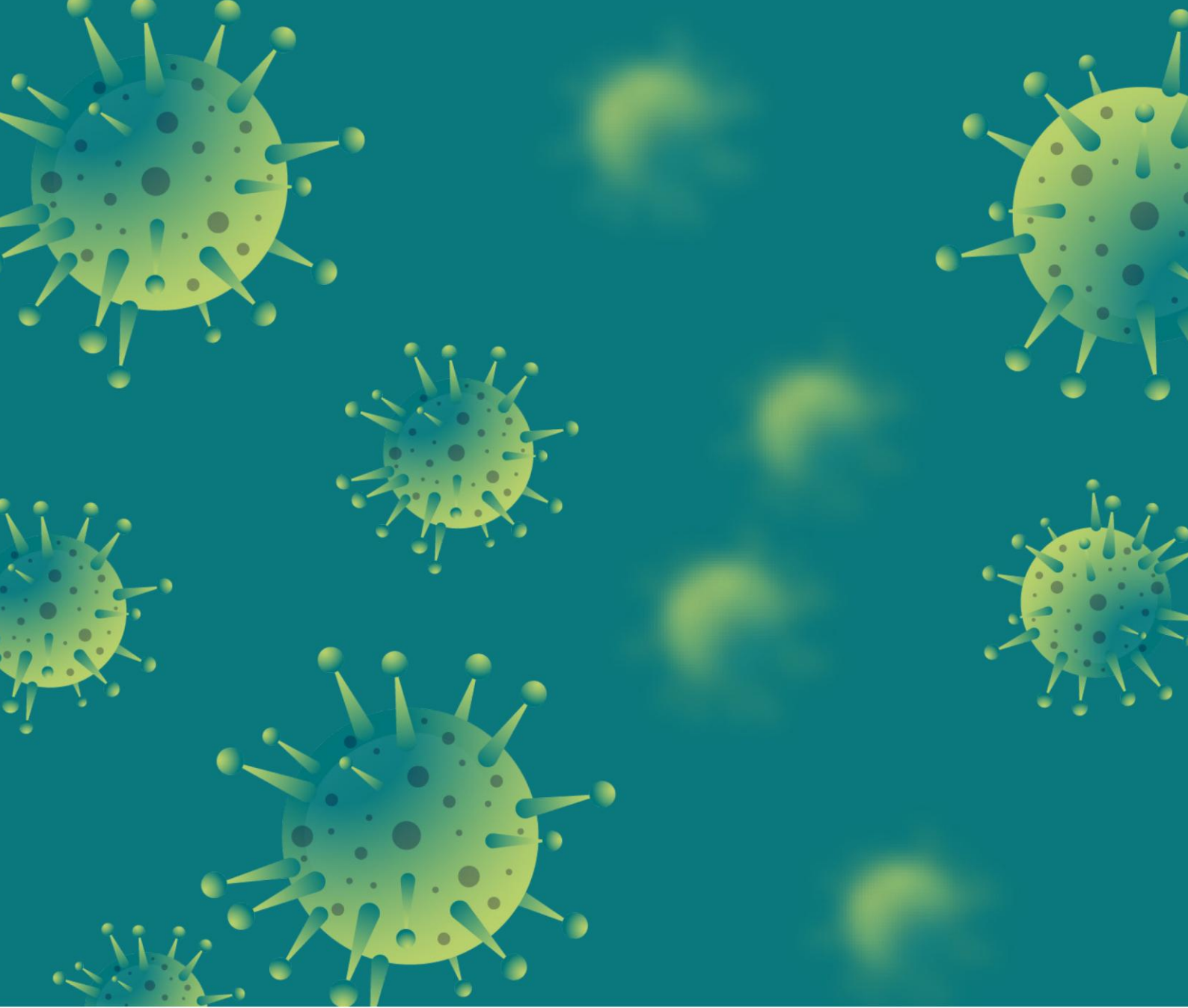




ACIPC

Australasian College
for Infection Prevention and Control

ACIPC Position Statement

Current and Continuing impact of COVID-19

Current and Continuing impact of COVID-19

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic remains an ongoing threat, as it enters its fifth year, with recent surges in case numbers continuing to have a significant impact on people within the community, healthcare workers, health service providers, and healthcare settings. To ensure the readiness and responsiveness of the healthcare system, healthcare workers, and the safety of the community, ACIPC recommend:

- Equitable and easy access to the required essential resources remains, including PPE (surgical masks and preferably P2/N95 respirators) rapid antigen and PCR testing, and antiviral treatment.
- Engineering controls in all health care and aged care settings are reviewed, including ventilation and air filtration be maintained and made widely available.
- Ongoing support of communities to engage in key prevention strategies such as promoting and encouraging vaccination, the use of respiratory PPE, clean air, testing when appropriate and applicable, and staying home when unwell.

Introduction

Whilst the WHO has declared the COVID-19 pandemic no longer a Public Health Emergency of International Concern¹, it continues to have significant impact on communities and health service providers. The Australian Government removed COVID-19 as a Communicable Disease Incident of National Significance (CDINS) in October 2023, but acknowledged that a significant impact on the ongoing management of COVID-19 in Australia remains². In Australia, over 45,000 cases of COVID-19 have been already reported in 2024³, with a 7-day average of 200 cases admitted to a hospital, and 73 admitted to ICU⁴. As of February 1st 2024, there were 287 active COVID-19 outbreaks in residential aged care facilities across Australia, with 1,384 resident cases, and 630 staff cases reported⁴. In the previous 7 days, 15 resident deaths were reported⁴. Healthcare facilities remain a high-risk COVID-19 setting due to surges in community case numbers, and the admission of severe cases⁵.

Recommendations

ACIPC recommend the following key infection prevention and control strategies to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on health services and the general community:

- Implementation and maintenance of the hierarchy of controls for all settings, especially those where vulnerable people are in attendance. This should include administrative, engineering, and environmental controls.
- An update on vaccination advice to be provided by The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) in early 2024, ahead of the likely impact of influenza season. Until that time, the existing advice for further doses remains as of November 2023⁶ and is proving inadequate with the arrival of monovalent updated vaccines.

- Consideration of ventilation and air filtration in health care and community settings, to ensure pandemic-ready design of all new facilities and redevelopments⁵.
- System wide and executive leadership support to ensure healthcare worker adoption and practice of local guidance, as well as access to and ongoing training in the principles of infection prevention and control such as safe selection and use of PPE, including but not limited to surgical masks and preferably P2/N95 respirators.
- Promotion of free and available access to vaccinations for all healthcare worker groups, vulnerable cohorts, and the wider population where vaccination coverage is low.
- Proactive prevention, identification, and management of people with COVID-19, including:
 - A new Public Health campaign, promoting and enhancing more cost-effective access to rapid antigen and PCR testing to all health care sectors
 - Availability and accessibility of masks and preferably P2/N95 respirators in the community
 - Increased availability and accessibility to antiviral prescriptions and treatments
 - Risk communication to communities and employers to support people with COVID-19, or other respiratory illnesses, to stay at home until resolution of acute symptoms⁷
 - Ongoing discussions with employers to enable people access to paid sick leave, especially those working with vulnerable communities and in health care
 - Businesses, education institutions, and industry undertake ongoing assessments of their workplaces to ensure they remain COVID-19 safe, taking into account public health and other relevant advice
- Activities to support a One Health approach to COVID-19 with new research initiatives including:
 - Large-scale clinical trials to better understand, treat and prevent long COVID.
 - Government funding for the development of new COVID-19 vaccines and antiviral drugs as new variants emerge.



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