

From the Chief Medical Officer
Professor Sir Michael McBride



HSS(MD)18/2023

FOR ACTION

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/SPPG/HSC
Trusts/NIAS

GP Medical Advisers, All General Practitioners and GP
locums (*for onward distribution to practice staff*)

OOHs Medical Managers (*for onward distribution to staff*)

RQIA (*for onward distribution to independent sector health
and social care providers*)

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SQ

Tel: 028 9052 0563

Email: Michael.McBride@health-ni.gov.uk

Our Ref: HSS(MD)18/2023

Date: 27 March 2022

PLEASE SEE ATTACHED FULL CIRCULATION LIST

Dear Colleagues

UPDATED COVID-19 TESTING GUIDANCE TO SUPPORT CLINICAL PATHWAYS

Introduction

1. The purpose of this letter is to remind Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts about the current guidance relating to COVID-19 testing which is in place to support clinical pathways. The guidance is as set out in my letter 'Clinical Pathways Guidance HSS(MD) 50/2022' which was issued on 8 November 2022 and which can be accessed at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-50-2022.pdf>
2. This letter also notifies HSC Trusts of some changes to the COVID-19 testing advice and recommended testing technology for certain patient groups.
3. I would ask that this letter is cascaded throughout your organisation as appropriate, and that Executive Directors and Management Teams ensure they have systems in place to oversee and assure implementation of the guidance set out in both this letter and the previously circulated Clinical Pathways Guidance HSS(MD) 50/2022.

Asymptomatic Patients

4. HSC Trusts are reminded that in the main, **asymptomatic patients (those with no symptoms of COVID-19) who are attending hospital do not need to be routinely tested for COVID-19.** HSC Trusts continuing to test asymptomatic patients for COVID-19 are asked to pause testing with immediate effect, except in the particular circumstances outlined in Paragraph 9 below.

5. LumiraDx should not be used for asymptomatic testing. Where testing is indicated following a dynamic risk assessment, asymptomatic patients should be tested using **Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests** only. This includes patients who are hospital transfers, or patients being discharged from hospital to a care home or hospice. **This is a change to the testing pathway for these groups of patients.**
6. HSC Trusts can continue to exercise local discretion with regard to COVID-19 testing of asymptomatic patients who are **unscheduled admissions to hospital** (either via the Emergency Department or as a direct admission via any other route), with the decision to test based on clinical assessment and a dynamic risk assessment. If following such risk assessment COVID-19 testing is advised, asymptomatic patients should be tested using **LFD** tests only. LumiraDx is no longer recommended as a testing technology in the Emergency Department. **This is a change to the testing pathway for this group of patients.**
7. If a patient is admitted via the **Emergency Department** and the first LFD test is negative, HSC Trusts can if appropriate undertake further LFD testing every 24 hours that a patient remains in the ED setting.

Asymptomatic patients admitted to a labour ward

8. COVID-19 testing of asymptomatic patients (excluding immunosuppressed patients – see paragraph 9 below) admitted to a labour ward or equivalent setting can now be paused. **This is a change to the testing pathway for this group of patients.**

Asymptomatic testing that should continue

9. Testing of asymptomatic patients should only be undertaken in line with the current advice set out in the Clinical Pathways Guidance HSS(MD) 50/2022 for the **following specific groups**:

HSS(MD) 50/2022 Ref:	Asymptomatic Group to be Tested	Testing Type
Unscheduled admission to hospital		
Row 2	Via Emergency Department	
	• All asymptomatic oncology, haematology and transplant patients	PCR
	• Immunosuppressed patients	PCR
	Direct Admission via any other route	
	• All asymptomatic oncology, haematology and transplant patients	PCR
	• Immunosuppressed patients	PCR
Planned admission to hospital		
Row 3	Day case procedure	
	• Immunosuppressed patients	LFD
	Procedure with post-operative inpatient stay	
	• Immunosuppressed patients	LFD
Admission to a labour ward		
Row 4	• Immunosuppressed patients	PCR
Testing for hospital inpatients		

HSS(MD) 50/2022 Ref:	Asymptomatic Group to be Tested	Testing Type
Row 6	Immunosuppressed patients	PCR
Patients undergoing cancer treatment		
Row 8	Asymptomatic oncology patients	PCR
	Patients with cancer being admitted for planned surgery	LFD
	All paediatric and adult haematology admissions	PCR
Patients who are COVID-19 contacts		
Row 9	Asymptomatic inpatients based on dynamic risk assessment	LFD
Patients discharged from hospital to a care home or hospice		
Row 11	Asymptomatic patients	LFD
Hospital transfers		
Row 12	Asymptomatic patients	LFD
	Immunosuppressed patients	PCR

Symptomatic Testing

10. Symptomatic patients (those with COVID-19 symptoms) admitted via the **Emergency Department (ED)** should be tested using **LIAT (PCR Point of Care Test)**. HSC Trusts that do not currently have LIAT in their EDs are asked to make the necessary arrangements to introduce LIAT to EDs before 31 March 2023.
11. For all symptomatic patients in other settings, HSC Trusts should continue to follow the guidance set out in the Clinical Pathways Guidance HSS(MD) 50/2022.
12. The Department continues to monitor the overall context in relation to COVID-19. All guidance and recommendations relating to testing recommendations are subject to change and further updates will issue accordingly as needed.
13. I would like to take this opportunity to again thank you all for your continued commitment and dedication to serving the needs of all patients and service users across our health and care services in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



PROFESSOR SIR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer

Director of Public Health/Medical Director, Public Health Agency (*for onward distribution to all relevant health protection staff*)
Assistant Director Public Health (Health Protection), Public Health Agency
Director of Nursing, Public Health Agency
Assistant Director of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, SPPG (*for onward distribution to Community Pharmacies*)
Directors of Pharmacy HSC Trusts
Director of Social Care and Children, SPPG
Family Practitioner Service Leads, SPPG (*for cascade to GP Out of Hours services*)
Medical Directors, HSC Trusts (*for onward distribution to all Consultants, Occupational Health Physicians and School Medical Leads*)
Nursing Directors, HSC Trusts (*for onward distribution to all Community Nurses, and Midwives*)
Directors of Children's Services, HSC Trusts
RQIA (*for onward transmission to all independent providers including independent hospitals*)
Joe Brogan, Assistant Director, Head of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) (*for onward distribution to SPPG Pharmacy and Medicines Management Team and community pharmacists*)
Regional Medicines Information Service, Belfast HSC Trust
Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, Northern HSC Trust
Professor Donna Fitzsimons, Head of School of Nursing and Midwifery QUB
Professor Neal Cook, Head of School of Nursing, University of Ulster
Heather Finlay, CEC
Donna Gallagher, Open University
Professor Paul McCarron, Head of School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, UU
Professor Colin McCoy, Head of School, School of Pharmacy, QUB
Professor Colin Adair, Postgraduate Pharmacy Dean, NI Centre for Pharmacy Learning and Development, QUB
Michael Donaldson, Head of Dental Services, SPPG (*for distribution to all General Dental Practitioners*)
Raymond Curran, Head of Ophthalmic Services, SPPG (*for distribution to Community Optometrists*)
Trade Union Side
Clinical Advisory Team
Louise McMahon, Director of Integrated Care, SPPG

This letter is available on the Department of Health website at
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/professional-medical-and-environmental-health-advice/hssmd-letters-and-urgent-communications>