

## **Contact tracing continuing as PHA urges people to follow advice**

The Public Health Agency (PHA) is continuing to conduct the process of contact tracing with people who have had close contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID-19. The agency is urging those who have been advised to self-isolate to do so, but is also reassuring anyone who hasn't been contacted as part of this process to go about their daily business and follow the COVID-19 advice for all members of the public.

Dr Gerry Waldron, Head of Health Protection at the PHA, said: "So far in Northern Ireland we have had a small number of COVID-19 (coronavirus) cases. To help prevent further spread the Public Health Agency is currently undertaking contact tracing of confirmed cases. Contact tracing is a fundamental, tried and tested part of outbreak control that's used by public health professionals around the world.

"If a person tests positive for novel coronavirus, we speak to the patient to identify anyone who has had close contact with them during the time they are considered to have been infectious.

"When we talk about 'close contact', it's important to point out that we're not looking for people the person may have passed on the street or in a shop, as the risk in these situations is very low. A close contact involves either face-to-face contact or spending more than 15 minutes within two metres of an infected person, such as family members, colleagues or fellow travellers.

"We collect information on these people and work to contact them as soon as possible. Once we have recorded the close contacts the patient had, we can categorise them into high or low risk, then contact them to provide advice on what they should do – this will vary depending on the level of contact they have had with the confirmed case.

"If we believe a contact is at higher risk of infection they may be asked to self-isolate, remaining in their home and staying away from work, school or public places, and we contact them daily until they can be given the all-clear. If the person being monitored does develop symptoms, we would test them and provide them with specialist care.

“Some people will be identified as lower risk – for these people, we provide them with information on symptoms and guidance on what they should do if they become symptomatic. This would be to contact their GP by phone and provide details of their possible exposure, and avoid attending the GP or emergency department without ringing in advance. They will be asked to self-isolate and a test will be organised.

If someone has been tested and is awaiting results they should self-isolate until they receive their results.

### **Follow advice and be assured**

Dr Waldron has emphasised the need to follow any advice given, as failure to do so could not only affect the health of the person themselves, but the wider community, particularly those most at risk from COVID-19.

“It is important that people take advice they are given seriously and follow the guidance provided so that we can help prevent the spread of infection and reduce the risk to others within our community.

“In the majority of cases it’s not necessary to release specific details of confirmed cases as we can gather the information we need from the individual and approach people who we believe to be at risk directly and quickly, rather than causing wider concern by issuing information and detail without public health need – therefore if you haven’t been identified as a contact, you do not need to be concerned.

“We have an overarching duty and obligation to maintain patient confidentiality. For this reason we would only release information that could identify individuals in exceptional circumstances. If we believe it was necessary, we would use the media or social media to help us get in contact with people.

“When we identify a UK case linked to another country or territory, we’ll notify the public health authorities there so that they can investigate potential contacts and take steps to prevent further cases. Equally, if public health authorities in other parts of the world are investigating an outbreak and find a link to the UK, they’ll notify us, either directly or through the World Health Organization.”

### **Simple steps to prevent spread**

Dr Waldron continued: “There are a number of simple actions we can all take to help stop germs like novel coronavirus spreading:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after using public transport. Use a sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are unwell.
- Always carry tissues with you and use them to catch your cough or sneeze, then bin the tissue and wash your hands (or use a sanitiser

gel).

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“We would also encourage everyone to familiarise themselves with the guidance on the Public Health Agency website at [www.pha.site/coronavirus](http://www.pha.site/coronavirus)

“This is a fast-moving issue, but I can reassure the public that the PHA has in place tried and tested systems for managing infectious diseases, and we continue to work closely with our colleagues across the UK and Ireland in planning and responding to this global challenge.”

ENDS

**Notes to Editors**