



Xx December 2021

## IMPORTANT: PERSONAL

Your Community Health Index (CHI) number: <<CHI>>

### Updates for people on the Highest Risk List

Dear [forename] [surname],

With winter now underway, I wanted to write to you about a few important points. Firstly, I wanted to update you on the new Omicron variant of the virus. I'll also share some advice about vaccinations, lateral flow testing, help with mental health and wellbeing, socialising, and going to work. All of these issues will be key as we work together for a safe and happy festive season.

#### Omicron variant

We do not know all that we need to know about the new variant yet. Early signs suggest it can pass from person to person more easily. Further work is underway to find out more about the effects on vaccine protection and severity of disease.

However, what we do know with certainty is that following the protective measures with a renewed effort and focus will help to reduce its spread. These include washing hands regularly, wearing face coverings where you're required to do so, testing regularly, and following advice around things like ventilation (such as keeping windows open if you can). We know these measures are effective and we continue to encourage everyone to follow them to protect us all.

Having your booster is one of the most important things you can do. Around 84% of people on the Highest Risk List have received their third dose or booster vaccination. With the arrival of the new variant, it's more important than ever that everyone who can has their booster vaccination. A recent study by the World Health Organization shows that the vaccination programme has saved more than 27,000 lives in Scotland.

If you are on any medication which suppresses your immune system, I am advising you to take extra care and to follow the advice of your GP or clinician. When your immune system is suppressed, even for a short period of time, it's important to be particularly careful to follow all the protective measures, as you may be more susceptible to viruses such as Covid-19.

## **Advice on socialising**

The First Minister has given some new advice about socialising. This advice is the same for everyone in Scotland. Cut down unnecessary contacts as much as possible. In the run up to and after Christmas, please avoid socialising with people in other households as much as you can. If you are socialising indoors at home or in public places, limit the number of households in your group to a maximum of 3. And test before you go.

We are not asking you to cancel or change your Christmas plans, and we are not proposing limits on the size of Christmas gatherings. But we will issue guidance to help you make Christmas safer. Reducing your contacts before and after Christmas is important and will help do this.

## **Vaccinations if you're severely immunosuppressed**

If you were severely immunosuppressed at the time when you had your first or second dose and you have not had your third dose yet, your Health Board will now invite you for your third primary dose. Some immunosuppressive treatments may affect when you get your third dose. Your GP or clinician can give you advice about this and when to book your appointment.

If you are severely immunosuppressed, have already had three primary doses of the vaccine, and are aged 16 or over, your Health Board will now offer you a booster dose. If your third primary dose was at least 3 months (12 weeks) ago, your Health Board will invite you for your booster soon.

A third primary dose of a Covid-19 vaccine is an extra 'top-up' dose to help increase the level of protection for people who may not have generated a full immune response to the first two doses and might be less protected than the wider population.

A third primary dose is different from a booster dose. A booster dose is an additional dose to extend the duration of protection from previous doses.

Find out more about third vaccine doses at [www.nhsinform.scot/covid19vaccinethirddose](http://www.nhsinform.scot/covid19vaccinethirddose)  
This includes more information about who can get a third dose and when.

## **Booster vaccinations**

If you are NOT severely immunosuppressed you will be eligible for a booster if it is 3 months (12 weeks) since your second dose. You will be invited to your vaccination appointment by letter or phone call.

If you think you have not been invited yet, or have been missed out, visit the NHSinform online booking portal at [www.nhsinform.scot/vaccinebooking](http://www.nhsinform.scot/vaccinebooking) or phone the National Vaccination Helpline on 0800 030 8013 (8am – 8pm daily) to check if an appointment has been booked for you. If you have carers aged 16 or over, they will be invited for a booster vaccination. If you're immunosuppressed, this also applies to your household contacts aged 16 or over.

## **Support with transport to your vaccination appointment**

Help with transport to your vaccination appointment is still in place if you don't have your own transport or support from family, friends or other networks, or use of public transport to get to your appointment. You can contact the National Vaccination Helpline on 0800 030 8013 (8am – 8pm daily) and they will put you in touch with local support.

## **Vaccinations for children and young people aged 12 to 17**

All 12 to 17 year olds are now eligible for a second dose of Covid-19 vaccine. 12 to 17 year olds who are on the Highest Risk List, or who are a household member of someone who is immunosuppressed, can receive their second dose if it's been at least 8 weeks since their first dose. All other 12 to 17 years olds can receive their second dose if it's been at least 12 weeks since their first dose.

People aged 12 and over who have not received a letter inviting them for a vaccination can arrange an appointment by calling the National Vaccination Helpline on 0800 030 8013 (8am – 8pm daily) or by visiting a drop-in clinic. People aged 16 and over can also book via the online portal at [register.vacs.nhs.scot](https://register.vacs.nhs.scot)

You can go along to a drop-in clinic at a time that suits you. You can find your nearest drop-in clinic on the NHS inform website at [www.nhsinform.scot/vaccinedropinclinics](https://www.nhsinform.scot/vaccinedropinclinics)

## **Easier lateral flow tests now available**

New lateral flow tests that only need a nose swab, not a throat swab too, are now available. These tests are free and now much easier to use. The tests are effective at detecting the new Omicron variant. You can order them from [www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-rapid-lateral-flow-tests](https://www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-rapid-lateral-flow-tests) or collect from a test site or local pharmacy. From early December many local authorities will also be making free lateral flow tests more widely available in places like supermarkets, transport hubs, local markets, local council offices and libraries. And any secondary school pupils can get free test kits direct from their school.

If you attend a workplace that offers regular testing, please continue to make use of the regular, twice-weekly testing that they offer. It's also important that you report all test results, whether positive, negative or void.

We are now also asking everyone to do a lateral flow test before mixing with people from other households. That means before going to a pub, restaurant, visiting someone's house, or shopping. I would encourage you to check that others have taken a test before meeting you to help protect you. This could include friends, family who do not live with you, carers, and tradespeople coming into your home. More people testing will help us control the spread of the virus and the new Omicron variant, protecting us all over winter and helping reduce the pressure on the NHS.

## **Support with mental health, wellbeing and loneliness**

I know that the pandemic has affected mental health and wellbeing, and that winter can be a difficult time for many people. At the moment you may be feeling anxious, worried, down or lonely.

Because of this I want to remind you that lots of help is available to support you and your mental health and wellbeing.

There are many ways to get help and support, including speaking to your GP, General Practice nurse, or other health workers in your GP practice. You can also talk to someone in your own clinical team, such as your specialist nurse.

I've included contacts who can help in the information with this letter. These include numbers you can call if you need someone to talk to right now. There are also details of a new support service called Connecting with You. It's there to help if you would like to reconnect with things you used to do, or if you are feeling isolated or lonely.

### **Advice on working**

Working from home continues to be important for controlling the virus and we continue to advise this where possible. To help slow the transmission of the Omicron variant, we are asking employers to enable everyone who was working from home before to do so again, at least until the middle of January. However, my advice to you is that if you can't work from home, you can go into the workplace.

We have published information and advice about employer responsibilities to make the workplace safe for everyone. This includes advice on using an individual risk assessment to support discussions and decisions about individual circumstances. It also includes additional safety steps you can take. This information is attached to this letter and online at [www.gov.scot/highest-risk-work-safety](http://www.gov.scot/highest-risk-work-safety)

### **Safety measures in schools kept under review**

The Covid-19 safety measures in schools have remained stable over the course of this academic year. Given more recent developments, we will consider if that position remains appropriate and whether there is any more we can do to further reduce risks. My advice is still that children and young people on the Highest Risk List can attend education settings unless their clinician has advised otherwise.

Yours sincerely,



**PROFESSOR GREGOR SMITH**  
CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

## More information

### Support with mental health and wellbeing

If you're struggling, remember you can always talk to your GP, someone else in your GP practice, or someone in your clinical team. For example, your physiotherapist or specialist nurse, if you have one.

There's also useful information at [www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health)

Clear Your Head has more information to help you cope and advice on how you can support other people who you think might be struggling – visit [www.clearyourhead.scot](http://www.clearyourhead.scot)

If you need to talk to someone, you can call these free services:

- **NHS 24:** call 111 if you need urgent support for your mental or emotional health. Open 24 hours a day
- **Breathing Space:** call 0800 83 85 87 for a free, confidential, phone service for anyone in Scotland over 16. If you're experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety, Breathing Space provides a safe and supportive space, listening, offering advice and providing information. Open Monday to Thursday: 6pm - 2am and Friday to Monday: 6pm - 6am
- **Samaritans:** call 116 123 for confidential emotional support if you're in distress or despair. Open 24 hours a day
- **British Red Cross Coronavirus Helpline:** call 0808 196 3651 if you're feeling lonely, worried, or are having difficulty accessing food or medication. Support is available in more than 200 languages. Open every day from 10am - 6pm

### New support service: Connecting with You

Connecting with You is a free service run by the British Red Cross. It's available to all people aged 18 or over in Scotland who are experiencing issues associated with loneliness.

We know being on the Highest Risk List may mean you've experienced loneliness or difficulty keeping up your connections. Many of you have told us about how isolating you found shielding. We also know that you may now be finding it hard to get back to doing the things you did before, and meeting the people you met before. Connecting with You aims to help you rebuild your independence.

#### How to use the service

To arrange a phone conversation about what kind of support would be most helpful to you, contact the British Red Cross:

- by phone on 0300 30 36 077 (Monday - Friday, 10am - 4pm. Calls are free)
- or by email at [connecting-withyou@redcross.org.uk](mailto:connecting-withyou@redcross.org.uk)

#### Types of support

Support will depend on your needs and what is available in your area. It could include things like:

- weekly phone calls to check in with you
- online support

- in-person meetings, if you're comfortable with these
- support getting into new or old hobbies and interests
- help meeting new people, or getting back in touch with people you already know

## **Making your workplace safe**

It is your employer's responsibility to regularly carry out workplace risk assessments and put in place measures to make the workplace as safe as is reasonably practicable to try and minimise the risk to staff including contracting Covid-19. Employees also have a responsibility to follow safe working practices.

We also advise that you carry out an individual risk assessment to look at your personal risk from Covid-19. This can help you to highlight your individual risk to your employer in order to discuss any additional changes that may be needed to make your workplace and duties safer for you, if you cannot work from home.

If you still feel unsafe after a workplace risk assessment, you should discuss any concerns with your manager or your employer. You can also get further advice from a range of bodies, including:

- Occupational Health Services (if your employer offers them)
- the Health and Safety representative in your workplace
- HR (your employer's Human Resources team, if there is one)
- your trade union or professional body
- Citizen's Advice
- the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)

There's more information at [www.gov.scot/shielding-work-safety](http://www.gov.scot/shielding-work-safety) including additional steps you can take to keep yourself safer.

## **National Assistance Helpline**

You can call the National Assistance Helpline on 0800 111 4000. This will put you through to your local council if you need help to get food, medicine, or other practical or emotional support.

This resource may also be made available on request in the following formats



 **PHS.HealthData@phs.scot**

 **0800 111 4000**

Use the subject line ‘translation request’ if you send an email. Include these details about the person who needs the different format:

- name
- address and postcode
- CHI number
- format or language required

Please tell us if we should always send information in this format. If you’ve asked before for a translation of the information we send, it’s on its way to you.

Find translations and alternative formats for past letters to the highest risk group at [www.gov.scot/highest-risk-letters](http://www.gov.scot/highest-risk-letters)

### **Data Protection Statement**

You have been identified from either your GP practice, local Health Board or securely stored national data in order that we could write to you. We want to reassure you that this information has only been shared in a limited way within the NHS in Scotland and did not include your medical record. During this time, we will keep your contact details in case we need to contact you again. We will also notify your GP and your Health Board that you have been contacted in order that they can provide appropriate support. To provide some of the support noted above, we may share your contact details only with your council. This is only so that they can support you during this difficult time. This action is only being taken due to the current Covid-19 outbreak. We want to assure you that your local council would not receive any details of your medical condition or health record. You can request your contact details to be removed from the Highest Risk List by asking your GP or hospital clinician.