

Interim guidance to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19 infection in Community Pharmacies

V4.0 11.12.20

Version	Date	Changes from previous version	Draft by
4.0	11.12.20	Section on ventilation added Link to HSE stay safe at work resources	AMRIC Team
3.0	30.10.20	Key principles to prevent the spread of COVID-19 section Clarification and expansion of point re: attendance at work	AMRIC Team
2.0	15.10.20	Addition of the following sections: patient contact services, medication delivery, medication returns, accepting/handling paper prescriptions, reviewing paper drug chart, key reference documents. Additional detail to following sections/reference: transmission, survival in the environment, cleaning & disinfection, PPE.	AMRIC Team
1.0	17.03.20		AMRIC Team

All HPSC guidance should be read and interpreted in conjunction with the [Government's Framework of Restrictions](#)

This guidance was developed in collaboration with the community pharmacy contingency group which has representation from the key stakeholders in community pharmacy.

Pharmacies, pharmacists and pharmacy support staff are to be acknowledged for their significant contribution in maintaining a continuous pharmacy service for their communities from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pharmacy service plays a key role in supporting public health and in particular is recognised as a valuable resource for people who are seeking reassurance and information. Pharmacists are an important source of accurate information and advice for people on COVID-19 infection, prevention and control.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide interim guidance to community pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to support delivery of this essential service with a high level of protection to people and staff against the risk of disease transmission.

Scope

This guidance document is intended to support community pharmacies in providing their essential service to their communities.

Introduction

The virus, which causes COVID-19 infection, is called SARS-CoV-2 and belongs to the broad family of viruses known as coronaviruses. It was first identified in the Wuhan province in China in December 2019 and a global pandemic event was declared in March 2020. For ease of reference in the guidance section of the document COVID-19 will be the term used to refer to both the infection and the virus.

Transmission

Like other respiratory viruses, the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 occurs mainly through respiratory droplets generated from the mouth and nose of an infected person during activities such as coughing, sneezing, talking or laughing. The droplets may carry virus directly to the mouth, nose and eyes of person standing

nearby or may land on a nearby surface. A scientific brief from the World Health Organization (09 July 2020) entitled Transmission of SARS-CoV-2: implications for infection prevention precautions – outlines new scientific evidence available on the virus that causes COVID-19. The conclusion of this report is that the virus is primarily spread through contact and respiratory droplets, but that under certain circumstances airborne transmission may occur (potentially, in indoor crowded poorly ventilated settings). In general, higher levels of virus are present around the time of first onset of symptoms. Some people who never notice any symptoms may be infectious to others (asymptomatic transmission). Virus can remain on the surface for some time and be transferred to the mouth, nose and eyes of another person on their hands after they touch the contaminated surface. The virus does not penetrate through the skin.

Survival in the environment

The SARS-CoV-2 virus has an outer coating called a lipid envelope. The presence of the lipid envelope means that the virus is likely to survive for shorter periods outside the human body compared to a non-enveloped virus like norovirus (winter-vomiting virus). The levels of virus decline quickly over the time period. The virus is easily removed from surfaces with common household cleaning products. It is easily inactivated with common disinfectants when disinfection is required.

Key principles to prevent the spread of COVID-19

- Do not attend work if you have symptoms of respiratory virus infection or are awaiting a test or test results for COVID-19.
- Do not attend work if any of the restricted movement criteria applies to you, check “Restricted movements” on www.hse.ie .
- If you live with someone who is waiting for test results, check www.hse.ie for the most up-to-date advice on whether you should attend work or not. The reason for their test (e.g. close contact vs. symptoms) will influence the advice provided.
- Be observant for symptoms of COVID-19 infection in people. If consultation or immunisation is required check with the person in advance of the consultation

otherwise at the start of the consultation/immunisation if they have symptoms of COVID-19 or are a COVID-19 contact.

- Follow public health advice if you, a household contact or other close contact tests positive for COVID-19 <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/factsheetsandresources/>
- Adhere to social distancing, respiratory hygiene & cough etiquette and hand hygiene.
- Use personal protective equipment appropriately when required.
- Maintain good standards of environmental cleaning and waste disposal.
- Keep up to date with information available from www.hpsc.ie and www.hse.ie

General preventative measures for staff

General precautions you can take to prevent the spread of respiratory viruses are:

- Do not attend for work if you have any of the following symptoms, or have been detected (positive) for COVID-19 infection, or are awaiting testing or test results, or have been advised to self-isolate.
 - [a fever \(high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above\)](#)
 - [a cough](#) - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry
 - [shortness of breath](#) or breathing difficulties
 - [loss or change to sense of smell or taste](#)
- Clean your hands regularly using an alcohol-based hand rub (if hands are not visibly soiled) or by washing with soap and water.
- Maintain social distancing when possible from all people in the pharmacy.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Observe and encourage others to observe respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette for example when coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue. Discard the tissue immediately into a closed bin and clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water. If you do not have a tissue cough into your upper arm or the crook of your elbow - do not cough into your hand.

General preventative measures for people using the pharmacy service

Pharmacists are an important source of accurate information and advice for people on COVID-19 infection prevention and control.

Public messaging

- People who have any of the following symptoms, or who have been detected (positive) for COVID-19 infection, or are awaiting testing or test results, or have been advised to self-isolate should not attend the pharmacy in person.
 - [a fever \(high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above\)](#)
 - [a cough](#) - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry
 - [shortness of breath](#) or breathing difficulties
 - [loss or change to sense of smell or taste](#)
- People who are in at-risk groups for severe complications of COVID-19 should minimise public contact of all kinds including going to the pharmacy where possible.
- If people in either of these categories have concerns or questions about their medicines or require a supply of prescription or over the counter medicines, they may phone the pharmacy or send a friend/relative, or have their medicines delivered, if this service is available.

Signage

- Place posters for pharmacies from www.hpsc.ie on the outer door and immediately inside the pharmacy. At the counter, you may wish to use the same poster or other posters from the [IPU](#) or public information posters from www.gov.ie Check that the advice on any posters you are using is up to date as recommendations are changing rapidly.

Communication (Messaging)

- Put a message on the phone (recorded message) and any means of communication used by the pharmacy (website, Facebook, Instagram etc) highlighting relevant information.

Social distancing

- Refer to most recent NPHET recommendation on social distancing at www.gov.ie
- Ask people to adhere to social distancing from each other and from staff.

- Adjust workflow and layout if needed to facilitate social distancing and consider the use of perspex screens at counters or between workstations.
- Deal with one person at/near the counter at a time. Consider putting tape or markings to highlight appropriate social distance.
- Where closer contact is necessary, e.g. to pick up the prescription and pay at the counter, ensure the person is close to the staff member for the shortest possible period of time. The prescription can be left on the counter for the person to pick up rather than handed to the person.
- For private consultation and discussions with people on prescriptions, medicines or other confidential information, consider how staff can facilitate these interactions whilst maintaining recommended social distancing and/or minimising face to face contact time including make best use of telephone or telemedicine interactions.
- Ask people to phone ahead, so that their prescription can be collected rapidly when they arrive. Consider an appointment system for pick up to minimise the number of people waiting in the pharmacy.
- If there will be a delay, e.g. for prescription dispensing, ask people to return at an appropriate time or to wait in their car.
- Consider any services which may involve prolonged or close contact and consider alternatives and ways to minimise the contact time required, e.g. confidential consultations with a person can be offered by phone/telemedicine for some or all of the consultation as appropriate. For example in some cases the person could return to their car and the consultation be done by phone.
- Assess the pharmacy shop floor area to see if space can be cleared to maximise distance between people, and consider a one-way system if feasible.
- Allow for social distancing in staff facilities e.g. canteen, changing facilities or consider staggered breaks or start times.

Patient contact services

- Private consultations in the consultation room may be required for such services as blood pressure monitoring, vaccination services, opioid substitution therapy, needle exchange, weight management services etc.

- If possible telephone triage in advance, otherwise check at the start of the consultation, to ensure that the person does not have any of the symptoms below, have been detected (positive) for COVID-19 infection, or are awaiting testing or test results, or have been advised to self-isolate.
 - [a fever \(high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above\)](#)
 - [a cough](#) - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry
 - [shortness of breath](#) or breathing difficulties
 - [loss or change to sense of smell or taste](#)
- Prepare necessary paperwork etc. in advance to minimise the duration of the consultation.
- Increase ventilation in the room as much as possible while still maintaining privacy.
- Maintain social distancing for as much of the consultation as possible.
- Wear a surgical mask when providing a consultation or a patient contact service such as administering a vaccine or monitoring blood pressure. In general other PPE is not required.
- It is not appropriate to use gloves for vaccine injections or other patient contact services, unless contact with blood or body fluids (other than sweat) is anticipated. If the healthcare worker has an infected lesion on their hand they should not be doing this work. If the healthcare worker has a cut on their hand they should cover with a plaster.
- Complete hand hygiene before and after patient contact.
- Have tissues and a bin available to support respiratory hygiene & cough etiquette.

Available resources to support vaccination

- National Immunisation Office advice on IPC precautions and PPE requirements when administering vaccines
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/fluinfo/ipcppevaccinescovid.html>
- Checklist available from the National Immunisation Office at
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/pubinfo/flu-vaccination/clinicchecklist.pdf>

- Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland Practical Guidance when Providing a Pharmacy Vaccination Service during the COVID-19 Pandemic available at: https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/COVID/Practical_Guidance_when_Providing_a_Pharmacy_Vaccination_Service_during_the_COVID-19_Pandemic.sflb.ashx

At the counter/front of shop

- Staff should pay frequent close attention to regular hand hygiene.
- Have tissues and alcohol hand rub at the counter – encourage people to avail of them.
- Consider offering alcohol hand gel to people before they use a commonly shared item such as a pen, touch key pad.
- Commonly shared items should be cleaned frequently using a detergent wipe or cleaning product compatible with manufacturers' instructions.
- Encourage payment by card instead of cash - contactless payment may reduce the risk of infection. If a person uses cash, the risk is low, particularly if staff members clean their hands regularly after handling cash.
- There should be no multiple use testers/samples of products available.
- Some pharmacies may change processes to minimise handling of products by people visiting the pharmacy. This should follow an assessment of risk and benefit, including efforts to minimise social contact and potential for transmission, balanced with ensuring people can get in and out of the pharmacy as efficiently and quickly as possible.

Person with symptoms presents in the pharmacy

- Maintain social distancing as far as is practical to provide the person with advice on how to access the HSE website for information www.hse.ie
- If a person is asking about accessing testing for COVID-19 because they are symptomatic they should be advised to return home and contact their general practitioner BY TELEPHONE for assessment and to arrange for testing for COVID-19.
- If the person is concerned because they do not have a GP advise them to ring HSE LIVE 1850 241 850

- The person should be advised not to present to the GP surgery or the Emergency Department.
- Once the person has departed clean and decontaminate any frequently touched surfaces. This can be done in two stages (clean and then disinfect) or with a combined detergent and disinfectant wipe.

Staff with symptoms

- Staff should be aware not to attend work if they have any of the symptoms below, have been detected (positive) for COVID-19 infection, or are awaiting testing or test results, or have been advised to self-isolate.
 - [a fever \(high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above\)](#)
 - [a cough](#) - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry
 - [shortness of breath](#) or breathing difficulties
 - [loss or change to sense of smell or taste](#)
- If a staff member has symptoms they should contact their own GP for assessment (or HSE Live as above).
- If a staff member develops symptoms during the working day they should as promptly as possible make arrangements to leave work and contact their GP for advice.
- Once the person has departed clean and decontaminate any frequently touched surfaces. This can be done in two stages (clean and then disinfect) or with a combined detergent and disinfectant wipe.

Hand hygiene

- For alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) the recommended alcohol content is between 60% and 80%
- Facilitators of good hand hygiene should be adhered to:
 - Keep nails short and pay attention to them when handwashing
 - Do not wear nail polish or artificial nails
 - Avoid hand or wrist jewellery, a single plain ring is acceptable
 - Avoid long sleeves.

Environmental cleaning/Disinfection

- Cleaning: existing cleaning measures (using household detergents) will suffice.
- If disinfection/decontamination is required: suggested product 1:50 dilution of standard bleach (4.8%) i.e. ~0.1% sodium hypochlorite.
- When cleaning special attention should be paid to surfaces or items that are frequently touched by people and/or staff including;
 - counter tops, door handles, drawer/fridge handles
 - till, credit card machines
 - keyboards, mouse, printer
 - phones
 - backs of chairs
 - equipment e.g. staplers, punchers etc.
- Frequency of cleaning will depend on number of staff, level of activity, number of people using the service etc.
- All medical equipment and devices that come into direct contact with people e.g. blood pressure cuffs:
 - If contact is with intact skin generally cleaning with a detergent is sufficient after each use.
 - If contact occurs with blood or body fluids (other than sweat) or person is known to be colonised with a multidrug resistant organism (e.g. MRSA, VRE, multi-drug resistant gram-negative bacteria) then disinfection in addition to cleaning of the equipment applies. It is recommended to always firstly clean with a detergent, then disinfect. A one step decontamination approach may be used and is practical for small amounts of body fluid by wiping the equipment/device with a combined detergent/disinfectant wipe.
 - Cleaning/decontamination should be carried out in accordance with the equipment manufacturer's recommendations to ensure the detergent and disinfectant are compatible with the surface material in order to avoid damage to the equipment.
 - The use of single use devices will remove the need for cleaning/decontamination.

- Ensure all non-essential items have been removed to facilitate cleaning.
- Ensure all surfaces and floors are of a suitable material and in a good state of repair to facilitate cleaning.
- Regular cleaning of staff facilities including toilets is also recommended.

Appropriate use of personal protective equipment in pharmacies

- It is important to emphasise that PPE is only ONE part of the process. It is all of the infection prevention and control measures as a WHOLE that is vital in interrupting transmission, i.e. hand hygiene, social distancing, respiratory hygiene & cough etiquette and environmental cleaning.
- Gloves should not be used unless as a requirement for a specific task or handling hazardous substances in the normal course of work or for contact with blood or body fluids (other than sweat).
 - Wearing gloves when not indicated can create a false sense of security and distract from other essential preventive measures such as hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.

NPHET recommendation 22nd April 2020 Use of surgical masks in healthcare settings;

- Surgical masks should be worn by healthcare workers when they are providing care to people and are within 2m of a person, regardless of the COVID-19 status of the person
- Surgical masks should be worn by all healthcare workers for all encounters, of 15 minutes or more, with other healthcare workers in the workplace where a distance of 2m cannot be maintained
- Safe mask use poster available at: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/posters/>
- Bear in mind the impact of PPE for some people on effective communication.

Pharmacies have been provided with packs containing gowns, mask, eye protection, gloves and hand hygiene products.

- It is very unlikely that these items of PPE should be required in the community pharmacy setting. Note that it takes some time to don this equipment

particularly if one is not very familiar with it. The content of these packs should be reserved for very exceptional circumstances that may arise in which a pharmacist is required to have significant close physical contact with a person where COVID-19 has been detected or is suspected. In all circumstances that are foreseeable it will be preferable to advise the person to leave the pharmacy to access appropriate services and to then perform hand hygiene than to have the person wait in the pharmacy while the pharmacist dons unfamiliar equipment.

- For guidance on use of PPE see <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/ppe/>

Face coverings

NPHET recommendation 9th July 2020 Face coverings in healthcare settings;

- People using pharmacy services should wear a form of face covering to reduce the likelihood of the spread of infection from the wearer

NPHET recommendation 14th July 2020 Mandatory use of face coverings in indoor retail environments (mandatory by legislation from 10th August 2020)

- The wearing of face coverings should now become mandatory in indoor retail environments
- How to use face coverings poster available at: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/posters/>

Staff training & education

- Staff training should include hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette, social distancing measures, appropriate use of PPE, waste disposal procedures, environmental cleaning and patient equipment decontamination.
- Staff are aware of where to find the most up-to-date information and guidance in relation to COVID-19 on www.gov.ie, www.hse.ie, www.hpsc.ie .
- Pharmacy management provide clear guidance to staff when significant changes in practice occur.
- HPSC video resources and recordings of webinars are available at the following links:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/videoresources/>
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/webinarresourcesforipc/>

Medication delivery

- If there is capacity for making this service available it should be promoted as much as possible to avoid the need for people to come to the pharmacy - especially for people who are older or have chronic disease.
- Once medication delivery boxes/totes/chute capsules/reusable bags etc. have not been in direct contact with the immediate environment of a person(s) where COVID-19 is detected AND provided standard precautions, which includes hand hygiene, have been carried out by all staff in the course of their work then additional cleaning/decontamination of these receptacles is not required over and above what is considered routine cleaning.
- People who have any of the following symptoms, or who have been detected (positive) for COVID-19 infection, or are awaiting testing or test results, or have been advised to self-isolate should not carry out medication deliveries.
 - [a fever \(high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above\)](#)
 - [a cough](#) - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry
 - [shortness of breath](#) or breathing difficulties
 - [loss or change to sense of smell or taste](#)

Home delivery

- The delivery person should complete hand hygiene with ABHR before and after making the delivery to the person's door.
- The delivery person should maintain appropriate social distancing from the person when the person opens their door.

Residential care facility delivery

- The delivery person should complete hand hygiene with ABHR before entering and on leaving the facility and before entering and on leaving individual areas within the facility.

- The delivery person should wear a surgical mask while inside the facility.
- The delivery person should maintain appropriate social distancing from residents and staff in the facility.

Medication returns

- When accepting patient returned medicines, complete hand hygiene immediately after handling and disposing of the returned medicines.

Accepting/handling paper prescriptions, reviewing paper drug chart

- There is no evidence that COVID-19 has been acquired by handling paper/prescriptions and is likely of minimal risk providing staff practice good hand hygiene.

Ventilation

There is no current evidence or signal of concern regarding transmission of COVID-19 in community pharmacies. There have been queries with regards to best practice for ventilation and so the following advice has been added to the guidance.

- Increase outdoor air entry to community pharmacies using intermittent or partial window/door opening, before and after room/area occupancy as much as possible while balancing with:
 - Thermal comfort,
 - Security, an obvious priority in a community pharmacy setting.
- HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) systems
 - Ensure routine maintenance, and if filters used they are changed, as per manufacturer's instructions.
 - Keep HVAC systems and, extractor fans in toilets, running at all times (i.e. 24/7)
 - While room/area occupied operate at optimal/maximum settings,
 - When room/area unoccupied reduce to the lowest setting.
- Mechanical fans (use more common in summer) should only be used where there is a single occupant in a room and should be directed to exhaust directly to the exterior environment (e.g. open window), to minimise potential spread of pathogens.

- There is insufficient evidence to make a recommendation for or against the use of air purifying systems.
- If further details are required consult the following HPSC guidance applicable to all non-hospital healthcare settings which includes community pharmacies:
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/employeremployeesguidance/Guidance%20on%20non%20HCbuilding%20ventilation%20during%20COVID-19.pdf>

Key documents/reference points for pharmacies to refer to:

PSI COVID-19 operational standards for pharmacies provide further information on professional standards in pharmacies in COVID-19 pandemic and are available at:

<https://www.thepsi.ie/gns/inspection-enforcement/StandardsforPharmacies/COVID19OperationalStandardsforPharmacies.aspx>

PSI/HSE Business continuity planning for community pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic available at:

<https://www.thepsi.ie/tns/news/Coronavirus/InformationforPharmacistsCOVID.aspx>

PSI/HSE Home delivery of medicines by public servants and volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic

https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/COVID/Home_delivery_of_medicines_-_Joint_guidance_from_PSI_and_HSE.sflb.ashx

IIOF COVID-19 information hub <https://iiof.ie/content/infection-prevention-control>

HSE/IPU Frequently asked questions for community pharmacies available at:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/qid/covid-19-qi-learning/resources-developed-to-support-the-national-covid19-response/resources-developed-to-support-the-national-covid-19-response.html>

HPSC HSE Framework - interim HSE guidance on infection prevention and control (IPC) (in the context of COVID-19). This provides a useful checklist format to assess compliance and identify with IPC measures.

AND

Interim guidance on infection prevention and control for the Health Service Executive. This includes both general IPC advice and specific considerations for a broad range of infectious diseases.

Both available at: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/hseinfectionpreventionandcontrolguidanceandframework/>

HSE Stay safe at work resources available at:

<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/news/coronavirus/stay-safe-at-work.html>