

From the Chief Medical Officer
Sir Dr Michael McBride



BY EMAIL

Registered Manager - Nursing and Residential Homes

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SQ
Email: michael.mcbride@health-ni.gov.uk
Tel: **I&S**
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Dear Colleague

EXPANSION OF LATERAL FLOW DEVICE (LFD) SELF-TESTING FOR ASYMPTOMATIC VISITORS TO CARE HOMES ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

Protecting residents and staff in our care homes continues to be a key priority for the Department throughout all phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. A regular programme of COVID-19 testing is one of a range of measures which have been successfully implemented across all care homes in Northern Ireland during the pandemic response, to provide additional effective protection to some of the most vulnerable citizens in our society. Through this regular programme of testing, the Department continues to support the Care Partners' Scheme by making PCR-based testing available to nominated Care Partners for care home residents.

In early 2021, as an additional mitigation to assist and support visiting in care homes, a New Testing Intervention (NTI) involving the use of Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test kits for asymptomatic visitors to care homes also commenced.

The purpose of this letter is to advise that following an evaluation of this NTI, the Department is now moving to extend the LFD testing initiative to **all asymptomatic visitors across all care homes in Northern Ireland with immediate effect.**

Regular and ongoing testing of people who visit a care home can reduce the risk of COVID-19 by identifying people who might be carrying the SARS-CoV-2 virus but who are not showing symptoms (are asymptomatic) and may be spreading the virus unknowingly. Therefore, although there is no mandatory requirement for a visitor to have a COVID-19 test in advance of a visit to a care home, I would ask care home providers to promote and strongly encourage all visitors to avail of the free LFD self-testing kits which are being made available.

Visitors will undertake twice weekly **self-testing** in the comfort of their own home. For a visitor planning to make one visit to the care home during the week, the first LFD test should be taken three days before a scheduled visit, with the second LFD test taken on the day of the visit. A visitor who plans more than one visit should arrange to undertake their LFD testing on two separate days, three days apart. The Public Health Agency (PHA), through established communication channels, will

arrange to disseminate detailed guidance to care home providers to support the effective deployment of this LFD asymptomatic visitor testing initiative. This information, which includes a communication for care homes to issue to their visitors, will also be made available on the PHA website.

If the visitor has a positive LFD test result, they should immediately self-isolate and book a confirmatory PCR test (information on booking a PCR test is available at the following link: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>), they must not visit the care home. It is important to be aware that while a LFD test for COVID-19 may help reduce the risk associated with care home visiting acting as an additional mitigating measure, it does not completely remove the risk of infection. When used alongside the suite of other measure in place - including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), social distancing, good hand hygiene, and other robust infection prevention and control (IPC) measures - testing can be used as an additional support for care homes to safely maintain a balance between infection control and the very important benefits of visiting to the health and wellbeing of care home residents. Whilst the use of LFD tests is important as an additional measure, even with a negative LFD test result, it is imperative that visitors do not drop their guard. People should not change their behaviours and must continue to adhere to all required IPC measures and Public Health guidance.

I appreciate these continue to be challenging times for us all and I recognise the continuing pressures on our health and social care system. I wish to extend my continued thanks to all care home providers, managers and staff for their dedication and work to ensure the continued safety of all residents and staff. Thank you also to colleagues in PHA, HSCB and HSC Trusts for your continuing support.

Yours sincerely

PD

SIR DR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer

cc Sean Holland CSWO - DoH
Professor Charlotte McArdle CNO - DoH
Dr Lourda Geoghegan DCMO - DoH
Dr Naresh Chada DCMO - DoH
HSC Trust Chief Executives
PHA Chief Executive
HSCB Chief Executive
RQIA Chief Executive
HSC Trust Directors of Older People
HSC Trust Directors of MHL D
Eddie Lynch - COPNI
Pauline Shepherd - IHCP
Leslie-Anne Newton - ARC
Linda Robinson - Age NI
Pat Cullen - RCN