

# SAFETY ALERT

## COVID-19 and Respiratory Illnesses- Increased Cases

### Background

The AAD aims to provide a safe workplace for our people and align our policies with relevant Department of Health advice and Safe Work Australia National COVID-19 safe workplace principles.

The global COVID-19 situation continues to evolve, with a continuing requirement for monitoring of new strains. The uptake of COVID-19 vaccinations and natural infection to optimise immunity, the availability of COVID-19 anti-viral medications and a medically screened cohort, are all strategies that have been implemented in the AAP to reduce the risk of morbidity and mortality and operational impact in our program.

However, given our unique operating environment, limited medical and operational response capability, we acknowledge AAP participants remain at higher risk of infectious illness and its sequelae and therefore we must adopt additional measures to mitigate and minimise the impact of infectious disease to our participants, communities, their families and work environments.

We aim to minimise the number of cases and reduce the spread of respiratory illnesses (including COVID-19 and Influenza) within the AAP and to other National Antarctic Programs by adopting reasonable and practicable control measures.

**All AAP participants for approval to travel south are required** to provide evidence of 2023 COVID-19 vaccination, or a documented COVID-19 infection in the previous 6 months, unless explicit medical exemption from CMO or HOD/GM Ops.

Those who have contact with AAP participants or those in critical roles or teams, should ensure adherence to AAD COVID-19 safe behaviours and policy.

### Update

Australia is currently experiencing an increased number of COVID-19 cases with new sub-variants of Omicron strain. This new wave of infection is impacting Tasmanian based Head Office staff, contractors and AAP participants alike.

Importantly COVID-19, Influenza and other respiratory illness has been imported to our stations recently which resulted in an outbreak at Casey Research Station. Individuals have been impacted with deferral of travel south to recover fitness, isolation whilst infectious and increased mitigations to control the outbreak. Our Antarctic winterers remain at increased risk of infection and significant illness as they may be mildly immunocompromised. As a community on Station it is important to ensure compliance with AAP 23/24 COVID-19 Mitigation Measures, maintain COVID-19 safe vigilance and if symptomatic or infectious, seek medical advice, wear an N95 mask, isolate and avoid contact with AAP participants until recovered and no longer infectious.

Despite treatment being available on station there is a limit to the medical care available and medical evacuation may be required to access a higher level of medical care to ensure health and well-being and optimise recovery.

For further information, please contact AAD Polar Medicine Unit

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The Australian Government Department of Health (November 2023) have advised the following measures:

1. Ensure that your vaccinations are up to date to increase immunity
2. Consider wearing a mask at indoor public places or in crowded settings to protect yourself and slow the spread of the virus
3. If you test positive for COVID-19 or are feeling unwell, stay at home until your symptoms have passed. If you need to leave your house, wear a mask and avoid any high-risk settings (including hospitals and aged and disability care facilities).

## Vaccination Advice

1. Adults should ensure that they have had a 2023 COVID-19 booster, unless they have had a COVID-19 infection within the last 6 months - a new COVID-19 vaccine will become available in coming weeks.
2. Under-vaccinated people are at an increased risk of severe illness and death. Staying up to date with vaccine recommendations is an important way a person can protect themselves in the current context of increased COVID-19 cases.
3. For those at higher risk due to medical conditions, or living with those at higher risk, and older age groups there are additional recommendations which you should consult with your medical adviser.

## Key Points and Actions for AAP Participants

1. All AAP participants should ensure compliance with AAP 23/24 COVID-19 Mitigation Measures particularly in the 10 days prior to travel south to prevent infection and transmission within the AAP. Wear a mask if unable to socially distance.
2. All participants should maintain their COVID-19 safe vigilance, ensure currency in vaccination and do a COVID-19 Daily Health Check.
3. If symptomatic or infectious, seek medical advice, wear an N95 mask, isolate and avoid contact with AAP participants until recovered and no longer infectious.

AAP participants (including expeditioners, ship's crew, aircrew and contractors) can access the AAD COVID-19 information at the following link: <https://www.antarctica.gov.au/antarctic-operations/expeditioner-hub/covid-19/>

Adopting COVID-19 vaccination and COVID-19 safe measures, you can make a significant contribution to protecting yourself, your family and friends, your work colleagues, and the AAP community and their science outputs against these new COVID-19 variants. (adapted Department of Health)

### References:

1. <https://www.health.gov.au/news/new-covid-19-variant-leads-to-increase-in-cases>
2. <https://www.health.gov.au/news/atagi-recommendations-on-use-of-the-moderna-and-pfizer-monovalent-omicron-xbb15-covid-19-vaccines>

**Work Safe.**  
**Home Safe.**

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