

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Aboriginal patients accessing public health services



Guidance to support the continued delivery of essential frontline services to Aboriginal people

This information provides **mainstream services with guidance to support the continued delivery of essential frontline services to Aboriginal people** during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, via safe and alternative means which support the most vulnerable members of the community.

Introduction

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has the potential to have a significant effect upon Aboriginal people, their families and communities. It is essential that Aboriginal people continue to receive ongoing services where possible throughout the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Failure to provide critical and essential services to vulnerable clients may result in:

- deterioration of existing health conditions
- increased demand on scarce hospital resources
- increased social isolation for already highly vulnerable people.

Why are Aboriginal people at risk?

While we are still learning about this new virus, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are a high-risk group for coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms due to higher rates of **pre-existing chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease** compared to non-Aboriginal people.

To add to these high-risk factors, the ability to contain the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) in Aboriginal communities compared to non-Aboriginal communities is more difficult due to:

- Households with a higher number of people within a smaller confined space, making it very difficult for individuals who are unwell to self-isolate.
- A higher reliance on public transport, family, friends and organisations to attend appointments makes it difficult to attend appointments and maintain physical distancing guidelines.
- Higher rates of unemployment and low income, food insecurity and family violence.
- Limited access to culturally safe and appropriate services.
- Poorer social and emotional wellbeing.
- The need to fulfil cultural obligations or practices.

Guidelines for service providers of Aboriginal people

1. Aboriginal Victorians who develop fever or respiratory symptoms should be offered testing for coronavirus (COVID-19).
2. Coronavirus (COVID-19) assessment centres have been established at many metro and regional Victorian hospitals, including some Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs). Details of these locations can be accessed via: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/victorian-public-coronavirus-disease-covid-19> or www.vaccho.org.au.
3. Ensure patient assessment includes appropriate ways for staff to 'Ask the Question' to determine Aboriginality – and hence risk category. Guidance on how to 'Ask the Question' can be found in the following links:
<https://www.murrayphn.org.au/portfolio-view/asking-question/>
<http://healthwest.org.au/projects/aboriginal-health/aboriginal-health-resources/>
https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/502680f6-b179-42fa-be71-8fd5d793d8d8/indigenous-identification-DL_brochure.pdf.aspx.
3. For patients who identify as Aboriginal, ensure culturally safe practices by staff are followed. For more information on providing culturally safe services to Aboriginal people go to: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/aboriginal-health/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-cultural-safety>.
4. Where possible link the patient into culturally appropriate services such as an Aboriginal Hospital Liaison Officer, Koori Mental Health Liaison Officer and Aboriginal Health Workers within the service or organisation.
5. Provide the option for referral (for any range of health and wellbeing issues) to either Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) or Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCOs) or other providers where appropriate. For example, the influenza vaccine, community health and social services.
6. Consider transport options to and from services for Aboriginal people who may not be able to transport themselves.
7. Have Aboriginal staff within your services been included in the high-risk category for contracting coronavirus (COVID-19)? Has the health and wellbeing of these Aboriginal staff been considered? <https://www.vic.gov.au/health-and-social-support>. Also refer to the coronavirus (COVID-19) Aboriginal workforce fact sheet on <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-information-aboriginal-communities>.
8. Provide advice on the recommended source of advice and updates on coronavirus (COVID-19) prevention and management <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus> including <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/physical-distancing-activities-and-tips-families-children>.
9. For Aboriginal people diagnosed with coronavirus (COVID-19) or in contact with someone with coronavirus (COVID-19) and remaining at home, identify means and culturally appropriate strategies for safe self-isolation. See <https://www.housing.vic.gov.au/crisis-emergency-accommodation>.

General advice

The advice presented in this document is subject to further updates. As such, all services are encouraged to:

- Keep up-to-date with current coronavirus (COVID-19) advice and information for health providers on the department's website: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>.
- Refer to <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19> for the guidelines for health services and general practitioners, including transmission reduction and physical/social distancing measures.
- Follow the **Chief Health Officer on Twitter** and subscribe to the **daily CHO updates** at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-daily-update>.

Department of Health and Human Services, Aboriginal Health Unit

In this document, 'Aboriginal' refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Indigenous' or 'Koori/Koorie' is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

To receive this publication in an accessible format email: COVID-19.AboriginalHealth@dhhs.vic.gov.au

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

© State of Victoria, Australia, Department of Health and Human Services April 2020

Available at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-information-aboriginal-communities>