

## Guidance for the protection of vulnerable persons during the transition phase of the COVID-19 pandemic

Early in the spread of coronavirus in Malta, the Superintendence of Public Health took an important step to protect those who are vulnerable in our community by cocooning them. This measure was considered as a foremost factor in the prevention of deaths from COVID-19 by decreasing exposure and reducing the possibility of contagion of vulnerable persons. Staff in several residential facilities also went into voluntary lockdown with the vulnerable to further protect their residents.

Taking into account recent evidence, persons within these vulnerable groups who are at higher risk include:

- a) persons of sixty-five (65) years of age or over
- b) Pregnant women beyond twenty-eight 28 weeks of pregnancy\*
- c) Mothers and their new-born infant during the first month after birth
- d) persons suffering from chronic illnesses and, or severe medical conditions including:
  - a. insulin dependent diabetics
  - b. patients who are immunosuppressed
  - c. patients undergoing any immunosuppressive treatment including but not limited to the use of biological agents and immunomodulators
  - d. patients suffering from cancer who are undergoing chemotherapy
  - e. patients suffering, or who have suffered, from cancer having undergone chemotherapy at any time within the last six (6) months
  - f. patients suffering from haematological cancers
  - g. patients with severe chronic renal failure or who are on dialysis
- e) patients who are admitted to hospital with respiratory problem exacerbations
- f) patients who, at any time within the last year, have been admitted to hospital with respiratory problem exacerbations
- g) patients suffering from cardiac disease who are to undergo a cardiac intervention or a cardiac surgical procedure
- h) patients suffering, or who have suffered, from cardiac disease having undergone a cardiac intervention or a cardiac surgical procedure at any time during the last six (6) months
- i) patients attending a heart failure clinic, or who have severe chronic heart conditions
- j) patients currently on or having just finished a course of steroid tablets/suppositories within the past 10 days

If in doubt, discuss your condition with your doctor.

Following the release of a number of measures of community-wide social distancing, it is critical that persons within the vulnerable category keep in mind that the **threat of becoming infected with the coronavirus virus has not been removed** and that everybody but in

particular the vulnerable **must continue to take every precaution to avoid becoming infected.**

### How is Coronavirus spread?

Coronavirus is spread through droplet infection by means of close contact with an infected person who would have coughed or sneezed in your immediate vicinity or by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your nose, eyes or mouth without washing or sanitizing your hands.

The potential for becoming infected is a factor of the viral load which is the number of viral particles that one may have ingested and the time of exposure i.e. how long one was exposed to the infective particles.

### What is the best way to avoid becoming infected by coronavirus?

The best way to protect yourself from becoming infected with coronavirus **is still to remain indoors as much as possible** and to only go out only when it is **absolutely essential**. Each person may have different views of what is essential and necessary, however if a relative or a neighbour can carry out an errand on your behalf this would be preferable. The advice of the Public Health authorities in this transition phase is to:

- ✓ Avoid unnecessary trips outdoors
- ✓ Keep a safe physical distance of 2 metres from others
- ✓ Wear a mask or visor wherever appropriate and necessary
- ✓ Wash your hands regularly with soap and water or a hand sanitizer containing at least 70% alcohol
- ✓ Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth

Each vulnerable person needs to make his/her own assessment of what constitutes an essential trip and the risk this entails, by being aware of the ways in which coronavirus can be acquired and by taking all necessary precautions whilst outdoors so that you can minimize your risks. The risk is cumulative, so every additional trip increases the total risk.

This guide aims to characterize the risk of a number of daily activities and provide an estimate of risk for each activity. Guidance on how to make these activities as safe as possible is also provided.

✓ **The best way that a person within the vulnerable category can avoid contracting coronavirus is still to stay at home and avoid going out unnecessarily.**

### ➤ Medical Appointments

You should attend for your medical appointments as scheduled. Some medical appointments are taking place by virtual means (over the internet) or over the telephone. If you are advised to attend for your appointment in person make sure that you keep the appropriate physical distance, carry hand sanitizer with you, avoid touching your face at all times and wear a surgical mask or visor appropriately.

## ➤ Grocery Shopping

Where possible ask for your groceries to be delivered by the supermarket, local store or a relative or friend. Ensure that you avoid contact with the person delivering the items and where possible leave items that do not need to be stored away immediately (such as to put them in the fridge or freezer) to lie aside for a few days (ideally around 2-3 days). Refer to the guidance for Grocery Shopping which can be found on [www.covid19health.gov.mt](http://www.covid19health.gov.mt) to guide you on how to disinfect your shopping to minimize the small risk of contamination from food packaging. If you must go to the supermarket yourself, try to go at a time when it is less busy, and you are likely to encounter less people (preferably in the early mornings as this will be closer to when the shop would have been cleaned).

## Risk assessment of various other activities

The transition strategy has taken into account a number of criteria to consider when carrying out a risk assessment of each activity. These include the following:

- ✓ Typical distance between persons during this activity
- ✓ Whether the activity takes place indoors or outdoors
- ✓ Length of exposure for this activity
- ✓ The degree of physical contact
- ✓ Typical social contact- the typical contact one has with other persons per hour of activity.
- ✓ Potential for aerosolization (creation of droplets or sprays)
- ✓ Contact with persons who have travelled from overseas
- ✓ The mitigation measures which could be implemented to minimize possibility of contagion of coronavirus

A group of public health experts scored a variety of common activities according to these weighted criteria. These activities were ranked according to level of risk to the individual, as long as mitigating measures are taken into account and implemented to reduce the risk for each activity. Mitigating measures are the measures which decrease the risk of transmitting or becoming infected with coronavirus such as the adoption of specific minimum distances between restaurant tables, enhanced cleaning of frequently touched areas, strict appointment system at hairdressers and beauticians and the appropriate wearing of face masks/ visor amongst others. The mitigation factors for each activity have been included in the guidance for each activity which can be found on [www.covid19health.gov.mt](http://www.covid19health.gov.mt)

It must be pointed out that the activities below are ranked with respect to the persons who are within the vulnerable category and not from a general population perspective which may result in some differences in the order of ranking.

Your risk of infection increases with the number of times and duration you carry out the activities below.  
Keep non-essential activities to a minimum.  
Use face masks/visors where recommended



During the phased reversal of community wide restrictive public health measures, Public Health authorities are recommending a number of obligatory conditions and guidelines for the safe operation of each of these activities.

These guidelines can be found on the website [www.covid19health.gov.mt](http://www.covid19health.gov.mt)

Vulnerable people are encouraged to attend for the first appointment/s of the day because an establishment would have just been thoroughly cleaned and the potential of contamination from other customers is less.

***If you must attend for essential errands outdoors, make sure you do this when the establishment is less busy or ask for the first appointment of the day***

### ➤ Visiting non-essential retail outlets and making use of non-essential services

- It is still safer to purchase goods online or have them delivered by a relative or a delivery person or a friend. If you decide to go for the item yourself or if you have to attend yourself for a service, it is advisable that you adopt the following good practice to decrease your risks of contracting coronavirus.
- Only go out if you are completely well and avoid any contact with persons.
- Take precautions when using public transport or car sharing options
- Wear a face mask and/or visor when in contact with any other person or persons
- Keep an adequate physical distance from others
- Do not touch your face or the front, or inside of your mask
- Keep your hands clean
- Attend at a time which is likely to be less crowded, stores would have had less customers and would likely just have been cleaned.

### ➤ Recreational Activity and Sport

Taking part in a recreational activity and doing some physical exercise is beneficial for all, particularly those who may be vulnerable and suffer from chronic illnesses. Once again, the safest way to exercise with no risk of getting infected is to exercise indoors. If you still drive, going for a drive with members of your household is one of the activities at a low risk which is safe to do. There would be a risk however if someone else is driving you. You can decrease this risk if you both wear a mask and allow for the vehicle to be well ventilated.

It is not advisable to go for a drive with multiple persons who are outside your household. However, in order to enable you to better understand the risk of meeting persons socially, for example, it is less risky to meet two people from the same household than two persons both of whom come from different households.

Going for a brisk walk or a jog depending on your general fitness level can be a relatively low risk activity provided that you select a place and a time which is not busy with other persons and you can adequately maintain a safe distance from others. Sitting down on a bench or stopping to purchase refreshments from a stall or shop is not advised, thus, ensure you take your own refreshments to avoid contact with other persons.

### ➤ Social and Family Visits

It is still not advisable for elderly and vulnerable persons to come into prolonged close contact with family members. However, if you determine that you would still like to see your relatives, the safest way to do this would be by:

- ✓ Organising the meeting to take place at the home of the vulnerable person, preferably in an outdoor area of the house e.g. yard, roof, terrace
- ✓ Limiting the duration of contact, make it a short visit
- ✓ Wearing a visor/ facemask (particularly by the visitors)
- ✓ Maintaining an adequate physical distance from your relatives/visitors
- ✓ Limiting the number of visits and number of persons from different households who visit you in a week.

The larger the number of persons and the more persons from different households you meet, the larger your risk that one of these could be a person who is COVID positive without symptoms.

### ➤ Taking care of young children

It is still not advisable for elderly and vulnerable persons to come into prolonged close contact with family members including young children. Should it become necessary to take care of young children, it is advisable that these children would not have come into contact with other children such as at childcare centres, since this would increase the risk to the elderly and vulnerable who are taking care of them.

#### **Important points:**

- ✓ The safest thing for a vulnerable person is to stay indoors as much as possible
- ✓ Have your groceries/goods delivered ideally
- ✓ If you need to work, tele-work is advised to reduce contact with others
- ✓ Attend for your medical appointments with a facemask/visor and carry hand sanitizer
- ✓ Maintaining good hand hygiene and an adequate physical distance from others and good hand hygiene are still the most important factors to protect yourself from contagion
- ✓ There is a cumulative risk of exposure. Keep non-essential trips at a minimum
- ✓ If you develop any symptoms of COVID call 111 for further guidance
- ✓ For further information regarding mitigation measures of a variety of activities please go to [www.covid19health.gov.mt](http://www.covid19health.gov.mt)

