

COVID-19 - Guidance for Isolating in Apartments

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About this guide

This guide for residents and Body Corporate Committees outlines the prevention and control procedures for COVID-19 cases self-isolating in apartments.

Dwellings with 10 or more units, that are either multi-storey or multiple titles under the one roof with one entry and exit to the building fall under the *Unit Titles Act 2010* and will have a Body Corporate in place to carry out the general management of the building. Body Corporates can have a Committee who provides this management function, and Committees may appoint a Building Manager to oversee the day-to-day maintenance and running of the building.

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Introduction

This guide outlines COVID-19 public health advice for residents and Body Corporate Committees of apartments.

This guide is based on international guidelines and best current evidence available as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves.

Further updates may be made as new evidence emerges and in response to the level of community transmission in New Zealand.

General Guidance to Residents and Body Corporate Committees

Routes of transmission

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is spread through the air both as droplets and aerosols. Settings with poor ventilation such as small, enclosed spaces increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission. A person with COVID-19 will breathe out small particles that contain live virus and can remain airborne for many minutes or hours.

Infection prevention and control precautions

General Information

The Delta variant is highly infectious and transmitted through aerosols, so wearing a face covering is one of the main ways we can protect ourselves and each other from the virus.

In general, wearing a face covering such as a disposable or washable mask whenever you leave your home will decrease your risk of being infected with COVID-19. Face coverings can protect you against the spread of infectious droplets and particles when an infected person speaks, laughs, coughs, sneezes or breathes (read more on [how COVID-19 spreads](#)). The COVID-19 Protection Framework sets out expectations for wearing masks, particularly at orange and red levels of the Framework.

Face coverings are one of several tools we have for stopping the spread of COVID-19, including staying home if you're sick, keeping a 1-metre distance from others, cleaning and or sanitising your hands often, sneezing and coughing into your elbow, and keeping track of where you've been and who you've seen with the NZ COVID Tracer app.

For guidance on using a suitable reusable or disposable mask or face covering see [Types of masks and face coverings](#). For guidance on how to safely wear a mask see [How to use a face mask safely](#) and the [Unite Against COVID-19](#) website.

For some people wearing a face covering is unsuitable due to a disability or health condition. See [Face coverings exemption advice](#).

For further guidance on face coverings visit the [Unite Against COVID-19](#) website. Read more about other ways of [Protecting yourself and others from COVID-19](#).

Engineering controls

The control of exposure at source, including adequate ventilation systems reduces exposure to infection.

Building exit and entry points

Body Corporate Committee may consider setting up separate exit and entry points in and out of the building to minimise contact where possible.

Foyer and waiting areas

Social distancing of 1-metre should be encouraged for entry foyer and waiting areas.

Body Corporate Committee may consider removing seats from lobbies or waiting areas to discourage people from congregating there. Where seating is required, space it at least 1-metres apart.

Lifts and stairwells

Residents should be encouraged to maintain minimum of 1-metre physical distancing while waiting for a lift and once in the lift or limiting the use of the lift to 1 person at a time.

Body Corporate Committee may consider using floor markings at lift entrances to prompt users to maintain physical distancing while waiting for the lift and encourage one-way flow to avoid bottlenecks occurring near lift entrance points.

Signage at lift entrances recommending a maximum number of people who should enter a lift to maintain 1-metre physical distancing can be used to help maintain physical distancing.

Residents should be instructed to not use the lifts or stairwells with others if they are undergoing self-isolation.

Gardens and courtyards

Communal gardens can remain open as a place for building residents to exercise and get fresh air.

Recreation and exercise restrictions do not apply to residential premises, however the number of people in these areas should adhere to current visitor restrictions.

It is recommended that these areas are not accessed at any time by any person undertaking self-isolation.

Other common areas

Body Corporate Committee may consider increasing ventilation of common areas to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission by opening windows or leaving doors open (where safe to do so) can help to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Where common areas such as gyms, indoor pools or saunas are kept open, resident safety can be supported by clearly signposting capacity limits and requiring them to scan in using the NZ COVID Tracer app.

These areas should not be accessed at any time by any person undertaking self-isolation.

Cleaning frequently touched surfaces such as intercom and lift buttons, hand railings and common area door handles regularly with disinfectant can reduce the spread of germs between residents.

Closure of facilities may need to be considered if capacity numbers are not able to be managed, or adequate cleaning between use is not possible.

Ventilation

If you are isolating inside your apartment, ventilation is important as this will prevent the build-up of virus in the air by exchanging stale inside air for fresh outside air.

Air from an apartment will usually flow out of an apartment every time the door is opened, so decreasing the number of times a door is opened and keeping the amount of virus in the air to a minimum, will decrease the risk of infection for anyone else living in the apartment building.

Buildings without HVAC systems

Opening windows in apartments that does not have centralised mechanical ventilation system can be a very effective method of exchanging inside air for outside air. Being able to open windows on two opposite sides of a room is particularly effective at ventilating a room by creating a flow of air from one side of the room to the other.

Using exhaust fans in the kitchen or bathroom is also an effective way of ventilating a room. However, most bathroom and kitchen fans are not designed to be run continuously.

If you are self-isolating, sealing the gaps under doors, for example using a towel, may also decrease the leakage of air into shared spaces, like hallways and lift lobbies of the building.

In accordance with the guidance from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/heating-ventilation-air-conditioning-systems-covid-19>), an average sized apartment, opening a window for 15 minutes will be sufficient to ventilate the apartment and introduce fresh, outside air and reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Leaving windows open will provide continuous ventilation. If it is not possible to leave windows open in the apartment over a period, it may require to be ventilated two or three times a day depending on the size of the apartment and the level of occupancy. If the apartment starts to smell, then that is an indicator of poor air circulation and will be time to open some windows.

Buildings with HVAC systems

There are many different types of HVAC systems but whatever system is used, regular maintenance is important.

HVAC modifications which may decrease the risk of COVID-19 infection include using as much fresh air as possible and filtering the air.

Most HVAC systems will use a combination of fresh and recycled air. Using 100% fresh air is the best way to remove virus from a room because the virus because fresh air from outside will not contain any virus. Recycling air, recycles the virus with it, introducing fresh air as much as possible, will remove the virus.

It is important to ensure that recycled air is not shared between apartments. HVAC systems with central air filters may be used to remove virus. However, the filters necessary to remove viruses are usually only used in hospitals or other areas that require very high-quality air. Several international organisations have provided guidance for modifications to HVAC systems to decrease the risk of infection.

View the guidance provided by the Centres for Disease Control (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/ventilation.html#refphf>), the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-conditioning Engineers (<https://www.ashrae.org/file%20library/technical%20resources/covid-19/guidance-for-residential-buildings.pdf>) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/heating-ventilation-air-conditioning-systems-covid-19>).

Information can also be found on the Indoor Air Quality Research Centre, New Zealand (<https://iaq.org.nz/>). Modifications to an HVAC system should be undertaken by a qualified ventilation engineer.

Air cleaning technologies

Air cleaning devices, such as High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters can be used to remove a wide range of pollutants or infectious organisms from the air without exchanging stale air for fresh air. These technologies can be used as part of an HVAC system, in addition to an HVAC system or instead of an HVAC system.

However, these devices can be expensive and currently are difficult to obtain due to high world-wide demand. Therefore, these devices may not be a suitable option for many apartment buildings.

High efficiency particulate air (HEPA) Filters.

HEPA filters can remove most viruses. Filters are rated by the proportion of particles which are removed from the air using a standard called the Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value (MERV). The higher the MERV rating, the better the filter is at removing virus. Filters with a MERV rating of 13 or more can remove airborne viruses. HEPA filters have a MERV rating of more than 16 MERV.

Physical barriers

Engineering controls, such as erection of physical barriers and dedicated pathways can be used to reduce or eliminate exposure of others in the building, including those self-isolating with COVID-19.

Balconies

For cases self-isolating, it is advised to have the doors to the balcony open to allow the circulation of air into the apartment.

It is advised that the case does not allow the possibility for others contracting COVID-19 from them by being on the balcony whilst other residents are on their balcony that is within a 2-metre proximity to the cases'.

Rubbish chutes and waste areas

Body Corporate Committees may consider placing hygiene stations with hand sanitiser near waste areas or rubbish chutes and encourage residents to wash and sanitise their hands after using waste facilities.

Cleaning, construction, repairs, maintenance, and safety

Within a general area, workers may enter a place of residence as well as common property to carry out work. If possible, the premises should be unoccupied while the work is being carried out. Body Corporate Committee should ensure tradespeople wear the appropriate PPE, scan using the NZ COVID Tracer app and maintain good hygiene <https://covid19.govt.nz/health-and-wellbeing/protect-yourself-and-others-from-covid-19/maintain-good-hygiene/>

Emergencies

In the case of an emergency, normal emergency evacuation protocols should be followed, and all residents should be wearing a face mask if they need to evacuate their units.

Body Corporate Committee may consider keeping a supply of emergency face masks near the building's emergency assembly point in case residents have not been able to evacuate with their own.

Property inspections and auctions

In general areas, property inspections and auctions can occur in accordance with general density limits. Property inspections for the purpose of sale or lease should be carried out by appointment only, and with only one person inspecting the premises at a time.

Auctions can be carried out within the capacity limits, maintaining a 1-metre physical distancing and wearing of face coverings, including scanning using the COVID Trace App.

None of these is to be carried out in the apartment of a case self-isolating.

Body Corporate Committee meetings

If there are residents or close contacts self-isolating in your premises, all meetings regarding building management should be held via telephone or online where possible.

COVID-19 Case Responsibilities When Self-Isolating

Preventing transmission of COVID-19 from a case self-isolating in an apartment or multi-unit housing block setting requires a multi-faceted approach to ensure containment measures are in place so that others in the building do not develop COVID-19.

For information about what staying at home means, see [Staying at home](#). It is important that you follow the processes in this document when self-isolating.

Emergencies

In the case of an emergency, you are to follow the building's normal emergency evacuation protocols. You will need to be wearing a face mask if you are required to evacuate the building. Ensure you maintain a 1-metre physical distance from others in the building during the evacuation, assembly and re-entry process.

Information for Body Corporate Committees

Management of confirmed COVID-19 Case

If a confirmed COVID-19 case is identified in your building, you can expect the following steps to occur:

- a. The person will be notified that they have tested positive for COVID-19. The person will need to isolate until they are no longer infectious and are cleared to leave isolation. They may isolate in their residence if they are able to do so safely. The person may also be admitted to hospital if they are very sick, or to a dedicated facility if it's not safe for them to isolate at home.
- b. Some residents, staff and contractors may be considered close contacts and will also need to quarantine at home. Public Health will advise those individuals directly.
- c. COVID-19 cases or close contacts may need medical support while isolating at home. It is important emergency services can access the apartment(s) for cases and contacts 24 hours a day, with no barriers to entry. You will need to help facilitate this.
- d. If the case or close contacts are members of your staff, they can request a work exemption letter from Public Health to show you, their employer. They will also be given a release letter when they are safe to return to work, which you can ask to see.
- e. *It is important you do not name the resident, contractor or staff member with COVID-19 or their apartment number. This is confidential information and should not be disclosed to others.*

Self-isolation advice is given to all COVID-19 cases and close contacts.

Refer to Appendix 1 – Checklist, Preparing for a COVID-19 Case

Deliveries for cases

If a case in your building in isolation needs to receive food, medicine or other deliveries, the following procedures should be followed:

- a. Goods be placed outside the unit door, and only collected by the case when the delivery person has left, and there is no one passing by.
- b. The case will need to wear a mask when they open their door to pick up the delivery.
- c. Develop plans to transport deliveries to individual units from the front entrance if access is limited due to building security procedures.
- d. If a case in isolation is unable to access a delivery service, a family member or friend, the case can contact the **Ministry of Social Development** to access support.
- e. If the case requires medical assistance, they can call ahead to their health provider to organise for one that is carried out virtually.

Rubbish disposal

- a. A case in self-isolation should not leave their apartments to dispose of rubbish.
- b. Rubbish collection and disposal can be conducted by the case's family member or a friend.
- c. The case should be asked to double bag their rubbish and place it outside their door when there is no one present in the hallway or corridor.

- d. Only when they are back inside with the door closed should someone collect it and take it directly to the building's shared waste disposal area.
- e. The person collecting the rubbish should wear single use gloves and a mask when removing the rubbish and thoroughly wash and dry their hands afterwards.
- f. The same process may be followed for laundry collection.

Environmental controls

Deep cleaning of the building is not required unless you have evidence that the COVID-19 positive resident who is self-isolating has visited communal spaces within the premises which will then require cleaning.

Effective cleaning and decontamination procedures are necessary to ensure removal of pathogens from the environment. There should be processes in place to ensure that environmental cleaning and disinfection procedures are followed consistently and correctly. Cleaning chemicals should be effective against COVID-19.

For further information refer to: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-information-specific-audiences/covid-19-general-cleaning-and-disinfection-advice>

References

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2. COVID-19 advice for multi-unit dwellings, Fact Sheet, October 2021, NSW Ministry of Health
3. Draft Apartment and Multi-Unit Housing Blocks, COVID-19 Information Pack, November 2021, Auckland Regional Public Health
4. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, Guidance, COVID-19 HVAC,
<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/heating-ventilation-air-conditioning-systems-covid-19>
5. World Health Organisation (WHO), Mask Use in the Context of COVID-19. Interim guidance 1 December 2020
<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/337199>

Appendix 1 – Checklist to Prepare for a COVID-19 case

If there is a COVID-19 case at one of your properties, Public Health will get in touch to request more information on your facility. The below checklist covers the kind of information you may need to provide, and the steps you may need to take.

Information to prepare	Answers
Total number of residents and staff at your property	
Do you have contact details for residents and staff at your property in an easy to share format (e.g., excel sheet)	
How are you currently recording visits to your property/properties? Are QR codes in place for staff, contractors, resident's visitors etc to scan in?	
Are all apartments or housing blocks self-contained? Are there shared or communal facilities? Are there shared lifts, corridors, stairwells or balcony?	
How many floors does the building have? How many blocks are there?	
Can you facilitate access to providers of welfare and or support services for any residents who are isolating and cannot leave their property?	
Can you provide 24/7 access for emergency services to a resident's apartment?	
Who would be the most appropriate contact person for your apartment/housing block if there was a medical emergency?	
Do you know where the nearest testing centre is for residents?	
Do you know the vaccination status of staff and contractors?	
Do you have adequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for staff (masks, gloves and hand sanitiser)?	
Do you have sufficient Infection Prevention and Control measures? This should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building ventilation system - Cleaning products & processes (especially for shared areas) - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including masks, gloves and hand sanitiser 	

Appendix 2 – Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can the isolating person enter a building and cross over the common property with safety?

Outside there is not a problem. The case should be masked. In shared areas such as lifts etc, the lift should be ventilated afterwards.

2. Does the unit in the apartment building have its own airflow system or is it part of the common airflow system throughout the building?

Our experience is that this is very difficult to find out. The MIQ assessment identified patterns of flow which were considered most likely to result in spread to other apartments. However, this is only relevant for building with HVAC systems. Body Corporate Committee of buildings with this system will need to be consulting an Air Quality specialist to ensure their system is able to cope with the COVID-19 case self-isolating and the measures they can take to ensure there is no spread into other apartments.

Many buildings will only have opening windows. The pattern of flow which would be most concerning is airflow from the apartment into shared spaces or directly into other apartments.

3. Is the door of the apartment opposite another apartment in a closed corridor?

- a. *Once the case is in their room or apartment, they should consider putting a towel or other draft excluder in the doorway to the main corridor. If corridors can be ventilated, they should, but many cannot except for fire doors which must remain closed.*
- b. *A case must be told NOT to open the door to people or go outside when people are there. Some apartments have a peephole to see if "the coast is clear".*

4. Is there a balcony on the apartment adjacent to others?

This is probably a low risk as the virus will become rapidly diluted in the air, but the balcony doors should not be opened at the same time if possible.

5. Who will help the person self-isolating?

The person self-isolating will have to arrange for assistance from a family member, friend or contact the Ministry of Social Development to obtain information on where they can go for services and support, what they can get help with, and contact information.

6. Is there a mask mandate throughout the building?

This can be mandated by the Building Manager/Body corporate in all common areas.

7. Are there multiple lifts or stairwells so that those accessing the apartment where the isolated person is living can do so safely?

- a. *This could require some co-ordination but in theory lifts could be designated for cases.*
- b. *However, it is possibly just too difficult to organise, manage and enforce.*
- c. *Having the lift remain open for a period or running the fan in the lift if it has one would appropriate after the case has used a lift. Stairwells are often closed in and not well ventilated, so are not necessarily better than lifts.*

8. Are there other immune-suppressed people living in the apartment building?

- a. *This relates to notification of other residents that a case is in the building, but the privacy of the individual will need to be protected.*
- b. *It is important you do not name the resident, contractor or staff member with COVID-19 or their apartment number. This is confidential information and should not be disclosed to others.*

9. Are there common recreational areas such as gardens, courtyards, gyms, pools, and saunas which the isolating person should not access?

A case self-isolating is recommended to not access the common areas in the apartment building.

10. Can tenants be refused by the Body Corporate Committee to self-isolate in their apartment?

Discrimination against tenants is unlawful under tenancy law when it breaches the Human Rights Act 1993. For example, it is unlawful to:

- a. *Not grant a tenancy to a person for any of the prohibited grounds of discrimination, for example because of their race, nationality, or disability. Disability includes physical illness, or the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing illness. This includes COVID-19.*
- b. *Discriminate when deciding to continue, extend, renew, vary, or to end a tenancy.*
- c. *Discrimination against tenants who are self-isolating at home due to, or who have recovered from, COVID-19 is an unlawful act and could be liable for up to \$6,500 in exemplary damages under the Residential Tenancies Act 1986. **See Tenancy Services website for more information on discrimination.***

A person being infected with an infectious disease may give rise to health and safety and similar concerns, but that fact would not crystallise rights of body corporates or landlords to evict. That is, normal tenancy rules apply. We noted that the existence of infectious diseases is as old as mankind and a common issue within cities. COVID-19 is simply the current focus.

11. Can tenants and unit owners be refused by the Body Corporate Committee to self-isolate in their unit?

- a) *section 79(d) of the Unit Titles Act allows a unit title owner the right to quiet enjoyment of his or her unit without interruption by other unit owners or occupiers, or the body corporate or its agents, except as authorised by this Act or the regulations.*
- b) *Tenants are under the Residential Tenancies Act entitled to quiet enjoyment to quiet enjoyment of the premises without interruption by the landlord or any person claiming by, through, or under the landlord or having superior title to that of the landlord.*

12. Where should I go for more information about tenancy issues relating to COVID-19?

*A range of information on COVID-19 related tenancy questions is available from **Tenancy Services**.*

13. Do we need to undertake a deep clean of the property?

- a. *You do not need to carry out a deep clean unless a positive case has been in the common areas of your building when symptomatic.*
- b. *Guidance on cleaning requirements is available from the Ministry of Health Website: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-information-specific-audiences/covid-19-general-cleaning-and-disinfection-advice>*



COVID-19