

Community pharmacy pandemic preparedness for COVID-19

NSW Health update: 12 March 2020

The emergency plan for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has been activated and we are in the Initial Stage of the Action Phase of this plan.

Pharmacists in charge should consider the actions in this document immediately. This document outlines principles for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic preparedness for pharmacists in charge in community pharmacies.

NSW Health will provide further advice as the situation continues to evolve.

Background

- COVID-19, influenza, and common respiratory viruses have similar clinical presentations. Currently, the only way to distinguish between them is through diagnostic testing. Because of this, this document will describe precautions that apply to all customers and patients with symptoms of respiratory tract infection.
- Currently there is no proven treatment to change the course of illness in COVID-19, or to limit the spread of the disease. Treatment is supportive and ranges from anti-pyretics and fluids for mild cases, to ICU-based ventilation for severe cases. Antivirals such as oseltamivir have no known effectiveness against COVID-19.
- COVID-19 may affect a large percentage of the population. This means that demand for community pharmacy advice, products, and services could be high, particularly if the virus co-circulates with seasonal influenza during the winter of 2020. Widespread community transmission may last for several months.
- Pharmacies play a key role in the prevention of all respiratory infections, including influenza through immunisation. NSW has recently lowered the age groups eligible to receive influenza vaccine by a pharmacist immuniser in community pharmacies, from 16 years to 10 years. More information is available [here](#).

Principles of pandemic preparedness in your community pharmacy

1: Governance structures for pandemic preparedness should be established and maintained

- Dedicate staff, time, and resources to action the principles in this document.
- Set regular meetings.
- Delegate roles clearly.
- Communicate regularly with key stakeholders, including your customer and patient base. Familiarise staff with preparedness activities.

2: Community pharmacies should monitor for up-to-date information from NSW Health

- COVID-19 is a new disease with new information becoming available regularly.
- The NSW Health [website](#) is updated daily and is NSW's best source for the latest information on COVID-19.
- The NSW Health [website](#) contains resources for pharmacies and community pharmacies, including posters and communication material that may be relevant for your customer and patient base.
- Pharmacies should establish points of contact with the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia and the Pharmacy Guild of Australia NSW branches.

3: Infection prevention and control, including personal protective equipment

- Infection prevention and control is imperative for protecting staff, patients, and customers.

- Refer to the NSW Health website for advice for community pharmacies on infection prevention and control for COVID-19.
- Key recommendations include:
 - Increasing the frequency of environmental cleaning, particularly high touch surfaces like benchtops and handles.
 - Pharmacy staff are advised to not wear face masks as precautionary measure.

4: Business continuity including surge staffing

- Pharmacists in charge should review business continuity plans and consider the need for:
 - Reallocating staff and resources to preparedness activities.
 - Contingency plans to surge staff in the event of high rates of absenteeism as staff become unwell with the expected respiratory tract infections including COVID-19, or are required to stay home to care for family.
 - Review of annual leave arrangements and vacancies in key areas.
 - Role substitution or redeployment of staff at higher risk of infection. For example, redeploying immunosuppressed staff to back-of-house functions without direct patient contact.
 - Additional staff during high demand periods. New staff should be familiarised with preparedness activities.
 - Implementing conservative policies to ask that all unwell staff remain at home.
- Pharmacy managers should plan to mitigate the impacts of widespread community transmission on: medications, personal protective equipment, other medical equipment, and delivery options.

5: Patient flow

- Consider the flow or movement through your pharmacy of patients who are symptomatic with respiratory illnesses. This includes considering:
 - Signage in front of your pharmacy to instruct symptomatic patients to move directly towards a specific location.
 - **Provide hand sanitiser at the entrance so customers and patients entering and exiting the pharmacy can use it and include signage encouraging good hand hygiene**
 - **Providing a surgical mask and hand hygiene options, if available, to the symptomatic patient.**
 - Social distancing strategies, such as advising symptomatic patients from across a counter with a 1.5m distance.
- Refer to the NSW health [website](#) for advice for community pharmacies on infection prevention and control for COVID-19 for more detailed advice on managing flow of symptomatic patients.
- Consider enabling easy access to products that may be in high demand, such as treatments for cold symptoms.
- Consider alternative pathways for collecting medicines, such as encouraging patients to leave their prescriptions on file and calling ahead to order, or arranging for carers to collect prescriptions to minimise attendance by symptomatic patients.

6: Influenza prevention

- Influenza can co-infect patients with COVID-19, compounding the burden on community pharmacies.
- Given the potential for surge in both seasonal influenza and COVID-19-related demand for services, strategies to prevent influenza should be encouraged. Pharmacists in charge should consider influenza preparedness early. This includes:
 - staff immunisation,
 - promotion of influenza immunisation to your patient base – resources are available [here](#),
 - early referral to the GP or emergency department for testing for influenza like illnesses.