

Most quarantines abolished – tracing to focus on health care units, care facilities and housing units for high-risk groups

The rapidly worsening COVID-19 situation requires a strong restriction of close contacts. With the exponential of infection rates, the authorities' infection tracing has lost its effectiveness. Exposed persons are advised to avoid contact with others.

Pandemic no longer containable by infection tracing

The Omicron variant, which has become the main virus, is spreading faster than the previous virus variants. The number of daily infections has multiplied since the beginning of December, causing serious congestion in the infection tracing activities.

As the pandemic situation has become more difficult, the testing capacity of the health care system has been overloaded, and access to testing takes several days. The authorities become aware of the infections detected by laboratory tests with a considerable delay, by which time further infections have already occurred. As a result, an ex-post quarantine prescribed retroactively by an infectious diseases specialist cannot prevent the spread of infection.

Tracing has lost its effectiveness due to delays in testing and in contacts related to tracing. A much higher proportion of infections is not becoming known to the communicable disease authorities.

The abolition of the tracing and quarantine of exposed persons in the event of a widespread pandemic is in line with the national pandemic plan established before the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Institute for Health and Welfare also stated in its statement of 5 January 2022 that tracing infections is most effective when there are relatively few infections. In a situation where it takes several days or even more than a week to seek testing and get tested, receive the results, make the tracing call and issue the quarantine orders, the effectiveness of tracing in preventing further infections is low.

Most quarantines abolished

Those infected with coronavirus confirmed by a laboratory test will be sent instructions by SMS and, if necessary, they may be subject to an isolation decision in accordance with the Infectious Disease Act. The decision may come after several weeks.

Those living in the same household with infected persons and similar close contacts can no longer be provided with individual advice and quarantined in accordance with the Infectious Diseases Act.

As of 10 January 2022, tracing by the authorities will be carried out progressively only in housing units for high-risk groups, care homes and health care units. In other situations, such as family, workplace, schools and early childhood education, those exposed will no longer be quarantined in accordance with the Infectious Disease Act. It is recommended that those exposed act on their own initiative to reduce the risk of infection. More information is available on the municipalities' websites.

Pandemic situation requires responsible action from everyone

Responsible action by residents of the municipality is necessary to slow the pandemic, reduce the strain on hospital care and to protect your immediate circle. It is more important than ever to stay at home if you have even mild symptoms and to inform your close contacts of the possibility of exposure. Asymptomatic individuals should also adhere to the current guidelines and restrictions.

Those with mild symptoms should not seek laboratory testing unless they are people at highest risk from coronavirus. Health care testing capacity should be targeted to those in need of testing on a medical basis, as well as to health care units, care facilities and housing units for high-risk groups. Others may choose to take the rapid test.

It should be noted that the sensitivity of the rapid tests to detect the Omicron variant is lower compared to other strains of the virus, so it is recommended that a person with symptoms who gets a negative home test result should confirm it by means of a new home test taken at a later date and avoid contact with others even after the negative test result. Guidance for the sick and exposed can be found on the municipalities' websites.

Switching to normal sick leave practices justified in current epidemic situation

According to the Communicable Diseases Act, a physician in charge of communicable diseases in a municipality or hospital district may decide to place a person in quarantine or isolation when the risk of spreading a generally hazardous communicable disease is evident and the spread of the disease cannot be prevented in any other way. The importance of quarantine or isolation in order to limit the pandemic has diminished. The practical significance of an ex-post administrative decision is often mainly the payment of a communicable disease allowance to the employer. However, social security alone is not a sustainable reason for making decisions that severely restrict individual freedom.

Isolation decisions are only made for those who are confirmed in health care to be infected. This puts people in an unequal position when laboratory testing is not available to everyone. Health care testing capacity should be targeted to those in need of testing on a medical basis, as well as to health care units, care facilities and housing units for high-risk groups. Applying for a test in health care services just to verify infection for a communicable disease allowance puts a strain on health care services and causes congestion in all channels of contact. This delays the treatment for serious COVID-19 disease and other diseases. It also makes it harder to allocate the testing capacity properly.

Instead of isolating persons with COVID-19, normal sick leave practices should be reinstated for these persons.

Starting from 10 January 2022, this policy will be gradually implemented in Espoo, Helsinki, Hyvinkää, Järvenpää, Kerava, Kirkkonummi, Mäntsälä, Nurmijärvi, Pornainen, Porvoo, Tuusula and Vantaa.

References:

[THL's assessment of the situation at the beginning of 2022](#), National Institute for Health and Welfare, 5 January 2022 (in Finnish).

[National preparedness plan for influenza pandemic](#), Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2012 (in Finnish).

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