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Three quarters of Australians at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 do not have a COVID plan with their GP

- *Almost one in four Australians are at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19.¹*
- *Only three in five (59%) Australians at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 are likely to test when they experience COVID symptoms.²*
- *Ahead of winter, Australians at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 are urged to make a plan with their GP, test if they suspect COVID-19, and act fast if they test positive.*

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, 12 April 2024 – New research released today shows three quarters (74%) of those Australians at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 do not have a COVID plan in place with their General Practitioner (GP) if they test positive for the virus.² The findings come ahead of winter and an anticipated rise in respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19.

There are a range of factors that put people at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19. These include being over 50 years, having a health condition such as heart disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory conditions, being immunocompromised, or being from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.³

The findings were captured in the fourth COVID Community Sentiment Index, a quantitative research survey of 1,000 Australians commissioned by Pfizer Australia in March 2024. For the first time, the Index separately surveyed 100 Australian GPs.²

The research found that 89% of GPs reported being concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the patients they treat, compared to only 67% of the general population who expressed the same concerns about the impact of COVID-19 in their communities.²

Dr Daniel Nour, founder of not-for-profit Street Side Medics and 2022 Young Australian of the Year, urges Australians to remain alert to the impact of the disease on more vulnerable people: “For most, COVID-19 is no longer front of mind, but the virus is still with us and we anticipate a surge this winter. If someone you care about is at higher risk of serious illness – maybe an elderly parent, a neighbour, a friend – check whether they have a COVID plan in place before they test positive”, Dr Nour said.

“If you are among the almost one in four Australians at risk of serious illness from COVID-19, you may be eligible for antiviral medicines. But you need to act quickly – oral antiviral treatment needs to be commenced as soon as possible after testing positive for COVID-19 and within five days of symptoms starting. Now is the time to check your eligibility and make a plan with your GP. If you do test positive, don’t wait for worsening symptoms, contact your GP right away”.

The research found that nearly half (44%) of Australians at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 would not routinely contact their GP if they tested positive, and more than half (52%) would anticipate difficulties getting a timely appointment with a GP.²

Dr Nour responded to this finding, adding: “Part of your COVID plan with your GP should include how you will contact them if you test positive for COVID-19 – this may mean booking a telehealth appointment or asking a relative or friend to make a booking”.

Dr Krishan Thiru, Medical Director at Pfizer Australia and New Zealand, said that in winter we spend more time indoors which increases the transmission potential for all infectious respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19.

“As in previous years, we expect another surge in COVID-19 cases as winter approaches. Staying up to date with recommended vaccinations, gathering in well-ventilated spaces and mask-wearing when



social distancing isn't possible remain important, along with knowing your eligibility for antivirals", Dr Thiru said.

Federal Government data shows that, as of 1 March 2024, a seven-day rolling average of 117 Australians a day were admitted to hospital with COVID-19 and 37 people were in intensive care units (ICU) with COVID-19 complications.⁴

Australians can check if they are at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 and their eligibility for oral antiviral medicines at www.health.gov.au or www.knowplango.com.au.

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About the survey

This is the fourth iteration of Pfizer Australia's COVID Community Sentiment Index, a quantitative research survey to canvass Australians' understanding and perceived risk of COVID-19. The survey was conducted between 1-3 March 2024, sampling 1,000 Australians aged 18 years and older and resembling the Australian population in terms of gender, age, state, and location. Additional populations of interest were boosted in this iteration of the survey, including an additional 300 people 50 years and over, 300 people with parents 70 years and over and 300 people who live in a regional or rural setting. These are statistically representative sample sizes. For the first time, GPs were separately surveyed, sampling 100 GPs practicing in Australia. These are statistically representative sample sizes.²

Previous COVID Community Sentiment Index surveys were conducted between 7-10 November 2022, 10-12 May 2023 and 27-30 November 2023 and each sampled 1,000 Australians aged 18 years and older. Survey samples resembled the Australian population in terms of gender, age, state, and location.^{5,6,7}

Further results from the March 2024 COVID-19 Community Sentiment Index

- More than four in five (83%) Australians are only somewhat, or not at all, concerned about the impact of COVID-19 in their community.²
 - These results continue to demonstrate the complacency revealed in the previous three iterations of the COVID Community Sentiment Index, which showed around two in three (61%, 66%, 61%) Australians felt less concerned about the impact of COVID-19 in their community than a year earlier.^{5,6,7}
- More than a quarter (27%) of higher risk Australians are not at all concerned about their personal risk of serious illness from COVID-19.²
 - These results are similar to the previous three iterations of the COVID Community Sentiment Index, which showed around a third (30%, 33%, 31%) of higher risk Australians felt less concerned about their personal risk of serious illness from COVID-19 than a year earlier.^{5,6,7}
- Over half (54%) of Australians at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 have not checked their eligibility for oral antiviral medicines.²
- Nearly all (99%) Australian GPs believe oral antiviral medicines are important for those at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19.²
- More than a third (38%) of Australian GPs believe those at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 are unaware of their high-risk status before speaking with a healthcare professional.²
- Only a third (36%) of Australian GPs believe their patients at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 are highly likely to test if they experience COVID-19 symptoms.²
- Only half (53%) of Australian GPs believe their patients at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 are highly likely to contact them (or another healthcare professional) to access oral antiviral medicines if they test positive.²

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References

¹ Clark A, *et al.* Global, regional, and national estimates of the population at increased risk of severe COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions in 2020: a modelling study. *Lancet Glob Health*. 2020 Aug;8(8):e1003-e1017.

² Pfizer Australia and New Zealand. Data on file, March 2024.

³ Australian Government. Eligibility for oral COVID-19 treatments. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/treatments/eligibility> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

⁴ Australian Government. COVID-19 reporting. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/covid-19/reporting> (last accessed 18 March 2024).

⁵ Pfizer Australia and New Zealand. Data on file, November 2022.

⁶ Pfizer Australia and New Zealand. Data on file, May 2023.

⁷ Pfizer Australia and New Zealand. Data on file, November 2023.