

REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

STATEMENT BY DR KALUMBI SHANGULA, MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES ON OCCASION OF THE 36th COVID-19 PUBLIC BRIEFING

12 NOVEMBER 2021

**STATE HOUSE
WINDHOEK**
**Check Against Delivery*

Hon Ministers
Senior Government Officials
Members of the Media
Fellow Namibians

1. The Current Covid-19 public health regulations which came into force on the 16 October 2021 will lapse on Monday, the 15 November 2021. As per established practice, the regulations are reviewed and amended before the expiry date and new regulations are put in place. I am honoured to present to the nation, the 36th COVID-19 Public Briefing. As you are all aware H.E. President Dr Hage G. Geingob is on an official visit outside the country and therefore unable to be here today. He has mandated me to conduct this public briefing.
2. On a consistent basis, the Government has informed the nation about ongoing activities to combat the Covid-19 pandemic in our country. It is encouraging that we have sustained a downward trajectory in the number of new infections, hospital admissions and deaths due to COVID-19 in the past six weeks across all regions in the country.
3. Bed occupancy, both for the general hospital admissions, high care and intensive care unit has significantly declined. For example, this week, no Region has reported a COVID-19 death in the last two days. This is encouraging. The improving epidemiological situation indicates that the multi-layered interventions put in place are working, and must be maintained.
4. Cumulatively, as at 11 November 2021, a total of 129 041 confirmed cases were reported out of the 765 406 samples tested. Similarly, 125 325 recoveries were reported, translating into a recovery rate of 97.1%. A total of 163 cases are still active. Three thousand five hundred and sixty-four (3 564) COVID-19 deaths were recorded since the beginning of the pandemic in Namibia in 2020.
5. From 16 October to 11 November 2021, the period covering the current dispensations, a total of 36 134 samples were tested and 737 new confirmed cases were reported, giving a positive rate of 2.0%. This indicates a decline in the positivity ratio compared to 3.6% positivity ratio reported during the previous dispensation. In addition, 1 478 total recoveries were reported for the current dispensation. A total of twenty-six (26) COVID-19 deaths were reported. Fifteen (15) deaths occurred at health facilities, ten (10) occurred at home and one (1) is recorded as dead on arrival (DOA). Almost all deaths involved persons who are not vaccinated.
6. We are capitalizing on the breathing space we have as a result of the low caseload to enhance improvements in health infrastructure and facilities.

6.1. Isolation facilities

- Government has completed the purchasing of the 70-bed tented ward located in Windhoek Central Hospital Complex. The donated 40-bed tented ward at Oshakati Intermediate Hospital has been commissioned.
- The contracts for the construction of the 98-bed Isolation Facility, an Extension to the Katutura Hospital TB Ward were signed. The site was handed over to the contractor and construction work has started. The projected date for completion is early February 2022.
- The 12-bed prefabricated Isolation Facilities for Okahao, Okahandja and Karasburg Hospitals were all commissioned.

- The Isolation Facilities at Andara and Otjiwarongo are at 78% and 82% completion. The outstanding components are medical gas installations and external works. They will be completed by the end of this month and the facilities will be commissioned shortly thereafter.
- The conversion of the Katutura State Hospital Nurses Hall into a 40-bed ward facility has been completed.
- The construction of a 15-bed ICU at Keetmanshoop State Hospital has been completed and the facility has been handed over to hospital management.

6.2. Establishment of ICUs at District Hospitals:

Government took a decision to establish ICUs at formerly less-resourced District Hospitals in order to improve service delivery. Towards this end, an advertisement was placed on the Ministry's website for the repurposing of a Ward at Katima Mulilo State Hospital into a 14-beds ICU facility. Scoping work was concluded at Outapi, Otjiwarongo, Rundu, Gobabis, Mariental, Engela, Opuwo, Mariental, Swakopmund, Otjiwarongo and Nankundu hospitals for the establishment of ICUs at those hospitals.

6.3. Mortuaries:

Steps were taken to upgrade mortuary capacity around the country. In this regard, the upgrading and servicing of the mortuary at Windhoek Central Hospital from the initial capacity of 186 cabins to 314 cabins was concluded. The total capacity is now 500 cabins, inclusive of the Police Mortuary. The Grootfontein Mortuary is upgraded with three new cabins to a capacity of 12 cabins. Arrangements are at an advance stage for the servicing and repairs of mortuaries at Otjinene, Epukiro, Tallismanus, Shuckmansburg (Luhonono) and Impalila Clinics, Nkurenkuru Health Centre; Katima Mulilo State Hospital, Keetmanshoop, Karasburg, Kamanjab and Eenhana Hospitals.

6.4. Provision of oxygen

The oxygen generating system for Rundu is nearing completion. Mariental State Hospital oxygen generating system was commissioned. The Welsh Government, through the Cardiff University and UNAM initiated the procurement of 4-ton oxygen tanks for Gobabis and Grootfontein as well as an oxygen generating plant for Katima Mulilo State Hospitals.

7. Other initiatives are being implemented to strengthen our COVID-19 preparedness and response and to prepare for the possible 4th wave. The National Logistic Thematic Pillar has been conducting Regional Capacity Assessment Visits to Selected Disaster Risk Management Warehouses with potential to accommodate COVID-19 commodities and supplies. This will streamline and improve distribution of these commodities. Assessment was completed in Mariental to cater for Hardap and Kharas; as well as for Oshakati, which will cater for northern Namibia. This will ensure supplies are available close to where they are need.
8. A total number of eighty (80) Health Care Workers were trained on matters related to rapid response, with the assistance of the Robert Koch Institute, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and (CDC) and World Health Organisation (WHO). This initiative will be cascaded to Regional COVID-19 Response Teams.
9. Africa CDC and WHO have availed epidemiologists to strengthen the country's response in the area of data management, contact tracing, epidemiological research on Covid-19 and enhanced detection.

10. **COVID-19 vaccination:** As at 11 November 2021, a total of 343 482 persons or 22.9% of the eligible population have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccination and 279 765 persons or 18.6% are fully vaccinated. There are sufficient doses of COVID-19 vaccines in-country, and more doses are expected to be delivered during the months of November and December this year.
11. It is a serious concern that the overall vaccination uptake in the country has declined in the past few weeks. This is despite the initiatives being rolled out to increase uptake. During the months of July to September 2021, the daily vaccination uptake stood between 3 500 and 4 000 and over 20 000 per week from all regions. This has declined to less than 1 900 per day and just above 10 000 vaccines administered per week. This trend must be changed for Namibia to reach the vaccination target by the end of the current Financial Year. In order to achieve herd immunity, we need to do more, least we stand the risk of finding ourselves caught up in future Covid-19 waves.
12. **COVID-19 Vaccination for Children aged 12 to 17 Years:** Current evidence suggests that children with certain underlying medical conditions are at increased risk of severe illness from SARS-CoV-2 infection. Prioritising those at risk of severe disease, hospitalisation and deaths is critical in our national response. Among the vaccines available in Namibia, the Pfizer vaccine is recommended for this age group. Legal informed consent for vaccination of children shall be obtained from parents or guardians who opt to have their children vaccinated. Therefore, Pfizer vaccine will be administered to adolescents aged 12 to 17 years. The expansion of vaccination to this age group will be done in a phased approach, starting with adolescents 12-17 years who are at increased risk of severe illness, hospitalization and death. However, all adolescents in this age group are encouraged to go for vaccination.
13. **Mix-and-match of COVID-19 vaccines:** Research is on-going to understand whether Covid-19 vaccines can be safely and effectively mixed and matched. Currently, WHO does not recommend the mixing and matching of vaccines. This may only be considered in cases of shortage of vaccines. In the event of a shortage of vaccine in a particular jurisdiction, WHO recommends the mixing of AstraZeneca and Pfizer. Thus, in the event, that a person has been vaccinated with the first dose of AstraZeneca, a second dose of Pfizer or Moderna, which is another mRNA vaccine can be given. However, AstraZeneca vaccine cannot be applied after vaccination with Pfizer vaccine if there is shortage of AstraZeneca. Research and development on mixing and matching of vaccines is ongoing.
14. **Booster Doses of vaccines:** Any decision to administer booster doses must be evidence-based, context specific and consider the benefits and risks for individuals and society. Therefore, the immediate priority for Namibia is to continue to vaccinate the unvaccinated population to achieve the set targets before booster doses can be considered. As more data becomes available and evidence more conclusive, the Ministry will provide updates, bearing in mind the vaccine supply and demand landscape, as well as the prioritization framework that includes front line healthcare workers, elderly and vulnerable persons/groups. Booster doses may also be considered on medical ground.
15. **Contribution of Medical Aid Funds to vaccination:** Government has been engaging Medical Aid Funds, through Namibia Association of Medical AID Fund (NAMAF) to explore avenues for Medical Aid Funds to contribute towards COVID-19 vaccination for their members and their dependents through the public sector. Technical consultations were concluded and recommended that an amount of N\$713.68 per dose will be contributed by

medical aid funds for each member or beneficiary vaccinated. The Ministry of Health and Social Services will regularly provide a list of persons vaccinated to the Ministry of Finance for engagement with the Medical Aid Funds.

16. **Trusted Travel System:** Countries around the world, including Namibia, have experienced incidences of falsified and counterfeit PCR test results being presented at the various Points of Entry. The same is also possible with vaccination certificates when they will become a requirement at Points of Entry in Namibia. This week, on the 8 November 2021, Namibia launched the Trusted Travel System. The system was developed under the auspices of the African Union, Africa CDC and PanaBIOS Consortium. It is designed to streamline the verification of COVID-19 test results presented at the Points of Entry. The System is expected to be fully operationalized at all designated participating Points of Entry by 1 December 2021. Consultations and scoping work have commenced for the introduction and use of **Digital Vaccination Certificates** solutions in Namibia.
17. **Amendments to Regulations:** Let me now turn to the amendments to the current COVID-19 Public Health Regulations. As I mentioned earlier, these Regulations came into force on 16 October 2021 and will expire on 15 November 2021. It will be recalled that the measures were amended on the 5th of November 2021 with respect to the hours of operation of alcohol traders. The new amendments are as follows:
 - 17.1. **Duration:** The measures will be in force from 16 November to 15 December 2021. If the epidemiological profile remains static, the measures extend automatically to 15 January 2022.
 - 17.2. **Public Gatherings:** Public gathering are increased from the current number of 200 to 500 persons per event.
 - 17.3. **COVID-19 Test Results Upon Entry:** All persons presenting to enter Namibia at Ports of Entry under this regulation, but who were previously infected with COVID-19 and after having been isolated in countries of departures, still show positive results with the SARS-CoV-2 PCR test at the Point of Entry into Namibia, will not be subjected to mandatory quarantine requirements, provided that such persons have valid de-isolation certificates, not older than three months from the date of discharge from isolation, issued by the health authority in the country of departure. The negative PCR test result for all other persons remains a mandatory requirement.
 - 17.4. **Sales of Alcohol:** Sale of alcohol shall be subjected to the conditions of the licenses issued under the Liquor Act of 1998 and the regulations made thereunder.
18. Namibia is following closely, new outbreaks of COVID-19 in other parts of the globe, such as Europe, the US, China and others. The lessons we can learn from these countries are that we cannot let our guard down. While vaccines do protect against severe illness and death, the disease can still spread and affect many people. Therefore, compliance with public health measures and getting more people vaccinated are critical. For a country like Namibia where the uptake and coverage are low, this must be a worrying development. The trajectory of the pandemic in our country in the coming months and years will largely depend on the conduct of the public in terms of whether we comply with the measures and whether more people turn up to get vaccinated. These are critical decisions for our country. In this regard, I would like to emphasize the following:

- We must comply with and adhere to COVID-19 Public Health Regulations without fail.
- We must avoid unnecessary gatherings. When we gather, we must protect ourselves appropriately and practice physical distancing to avoid the spread of new infections. Wearing of masks in public places remains mandatory.
- We must get vaccinated and encourage our families, friends, neighbour and work colleagues to get vaccinated.

19. Namibia has been, and will continue to conduct genomic sequencing to detect the COVID-19 variants circulating in Namibia.

20. I thank all members of the public for cooperation as we continue to fight this invisible enemy, the COVID-19 pandemic. We have to stand ready and stand together at all times. We have to be vigilant at all times. Through surveillance, we will continue to identify “pockets” of new cases. It is in the best interest of each and every one of us to promptly identify new sources of infection. This is how we are going to remain ahead of the pandemic and interrupt further transmission.

21. As we are approaching the festive season, and many people will travel to visit their loved ones, I reiterate that we must act responsibly. The decision of what you do during this time, if not well considered may have negative consequence on your health and well-being and the health and well-being of others. It is therefore important that we act wisely and put our safety and the safety of others first. Please ensure that you and your loved ones are fully vaccinated. Vaccination will redeem us from Covid-19 as it did in respect of poliomyelitis more than a decade ago.

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