



health

Department:  
Health  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Date:	16 February 2022		
To:	<b>Dr MJ Phaahla, MP Honourable Minister of Health</b>	From:	<b>Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19</b>

## RESTRICTIONS ON GATHERINGS

### Problem Statement and Task to Committee

Whether restrictions on indoor and/or outdoor gatherings can be amended or relaxed, given the current state of the pandemic.

### Background/Current Information

- Currently, the regulations for adjusted alert level 1 (as updated on 30<sup>th</sup> December 2021) restrict gatherings to no more than 1000 people indoors and no more than 2000 people outdoors, provided a distance of 1.5 metres between people can be sustained. Where this is not possible, venues are permitted to fill to no greater than 50% of their maximum capacity. Furthermore, everyone attending a gathering is required to wear a mask.
- The current regulations apply to all gatherings, including religious gatherings, restaurants, bars, shebeens, taverns, conferences, exhibitions, gyms, and other entertainment facilities, amongst others.

### Evidence review

- The evidence and rationale for moving towards a “mitigation” strategy rather than a “containment” strategy have been outlined in recent communication from the MAC (“Mitigating COVID-19 in South Africa: Going Forward Position Paper”, 8<sup>th</sup> Feb 2022).
- The MAC position paper highlighted the principles for implementing public health and social measures (PHSMs) which have been advanced by the World Health Organization (WHO):
  - That, measures with the highest level of acceptability and feasibility and proven effectiveness, and which minimize the negative consequences on health and wellbeing of all members of society and the economy, should be adopted.
  - That the decisions to apply PHSMs must be weighed against the wider impact of these measures on health and well-being.
- The risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission is much lower outdoors than indoors, owing primarily to better ventilation. It has been estimated that only ~1% of SARS-CoV-2 transmissions occur outdoors.<sup>1</sup>

### Recommendations

- **That the current restrictions applicable to outdoor gatherings be lifted.**
  - In accordance with the previous MAC on COVID-19 position paper, the wearing of masks outdoors and physical distancing should no longer be mandatory. Good ventilation continues to be recommended where possible.

- **That the current restrictions on the number of persons allowed at indoor gatherings, the minimum physical distancing, and hence the 50% capacity rule, be lifted.**
  - In accordance with the previous MAC on COVID-19 position paper, the wearing of masks indoors should be retained initially, but be re-assessed at regular intervals. On a monthly basis, the need for mandatory mask-wearing at indoor gatherings should be assessed in relation to the COVID-19 caseload, and the extent to which any changes in caseload are attributable to the relaxation of the above restrictions. The ultimate aim should be lifting of indoor mask mandates.
  - Regardless of any decision on mandatory mask-wearing at indoor gatherings, high-risk individuals, such as the elderly, those who are immunocompromised, those with comorbid conditions and those with whom they have close contact (e.g. caregivers), should be encouraged to wear quality masks (preferably surgical masks rather than cloth masks) in such venues, particularly if the COVID-19 caseload in the area is high.
- If a new wave of COVID-19 infections leads to, or is expected to lead to, high rates of severe disease or death, then consideration can be given to reinstating limits on gatherings, particularly indoor gatherings.
- Communication of this relaxation of the current Alert Level 1 restrictions needs to emphasize vaccination as being even more important at this stage in the pandemic response. Vaccination (including booster doses) remains a critical mitigation tool. High levels of vaccination coverage, particularly in vulnerable groups, contribute to the rationale for lifting restrictions such as those on gatherings.

#### **Rationale for recommendations**

- COVID-19 is expected to persist globally for years, possibly indefinitely. Costly, large-scale containment efforts are therefore inappropriate, and policies should be aimed at mitigation. While it is inevitable that easing restrictions on outdoor and indoor gatherings will allow for greater transmission of the virus,<sup>2,3</sup> the focus should now be on preventing severe disease (“mitigation”) by promoting vaccination and focusing protective measures on high-risk individuals, rather than trying to prevent infections *per se* (“containment”).
- South Africa now has a high degree of population immunity to SARS-CoV-2, which can be expected to offer strong protection against severe disease and death, as was seen in the recent Omicron wave.<sup>4,5</sup> SARS-CoV-2 seroprevalence exceeded 70% prior to the Omicron wave, and is expected to be even higher now. The virulence of future variants of SARS-CoV-2 and the degree to which prior immunity will confer protection from severe disease and death are uncertain however, and restrictions on gatherings may be reinstated in the future if necessary to reduce rates of hospitalisations and death attributable to COVID.
- The WHO paper on PHSMs (see above) states that “measures should have the highest level of acceptability and feasibility”. Noting that many people are now choosing not to wear masks outside and that this is unlikely to significantly increase spread, removing this measure may in addition promote the wellbeing and goodwill of citizens.
- Reducing unnecessary restrictions will allow society to return to normal functioning to the greatest possible degree, and is expected to have significant economic and social benefits.

## Process for implementation

- Regulation 69, related to “Gatherings”, amended by Government Notice No. R1659 (Government Gazette No. 45715, 30 December 2021) will need to be amended in order to give effect to the changes recommended above.
- In particular, attention needs to be paid to the specific restrictions currently imposed on faith-based or religious gatherings, social, political and cultural gatherings, workplace gatherings, accommodation facilities, restaurants, bars, shebeens and taverns, conferencing, exhibition, dining, gym, fitness centre, casino and entertainment facilities.

Thank you for consideration of this advisory.

Kind regards



**PROF KOLEKA MLISANA**

**PROF MARIAN JACOBS**

**CO-CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19**

**DATE:**

**CC:**

- » **Dr SSS Buthelezi (Director-General: Health)**
- » **Dr N Crisp (Deputy Director-General: National Health Insurance)**

Disclaimer: As stipulated in its Terms of Reference, the MAC on COVID-19 is an advisory Committee to the Minister of Health and does not have any delegated powers to act on behalf of, or to commit, the Minister or Government to any actions. Recommendations offered by the MAC on COVID-19 constitute evidence-informed advice only and do not represent final decisions of the Minister of Health or government.

## References

1. Razani N, Malekinejad M, Rutherford GW. Clarification Regarding “Outdoor Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and Other Respiratory Viruses: A Systematic Review”. *Journal of Infectious Diseases*. 224(5); 1 September 2021, Pages 925-926, <https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiab298>
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5. Ferguson N, Ghani A, Hinsley W, Volz E. Report 50: hospitalisation risk for Omicron cases in England. Imperial College London, December 22, 2021. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/mrc-gida/2021-12-22-COVID19-Report-50.pdf>