



13th March 2020

Dear Pharmacist,

The current Coronavirus outbreak presents a number of risks to the continuity of the activities of a pharmacy. The possible impact of the absence of pharmacist(s) and other pharmacy staff is a major factor that requires consideration by Pharmacy owners, superintendent and supervising pharmacists.

Pharmacy owners, Superintendent and supervising pharmacists should also ensure that all pharmacy staff inform and update themselves appropriately regarding the management of the Coronavirus outbreak and that adequate hygiene measures and facilities are in place in the pharmacy.

Up to date information can be found on the HSE website at all times
<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>

HPSC general guidance for Healthcare workers can be located at
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/>

As these sources of information are updated on a very regular basis, they are the best source for current relevant information for your pharmacy.

It is recognised that there may be significant patient pressure at this time, however patients and the general public are asked not to seek supplies of medicines over and above their normal requirements. It is vital that stockpiling at pharmacy or patient level does not occur. Doing so will disrupt existing stock levels and hamper the supply of medicines for others.

No medicine shortages currently affecting the Irish market are resulting from the impact of COVID-19 in third countries. There is no evidence to suggest that Ireland is likely to face general medicines supply issues now, or in the near future, as a result of any potential delays in the supply chain caused by COVID-19 related issues. However, this is based on normal use of medicines.

Please find attached a document which should assist in your review of your current Business Continuity plans in this rapidly evolving situation. You are asked to check your Business Continuity plans and identify specific roles and actions which could support managing local demand - ensuring you work in collaboration with neighbouring pharmacies and local GP practices.

The HSE can confirm that the distribution of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) to pharmacies will begin today and delivery should be completed before the end of next week. The supply of PPE is limited and it should only be used when necessary, in line with HPSC guidance.

The HSE will provide further advice on managing closures as it becomes necessary. Your local HSE Pharmacist will also be available for advice and assistance.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kate Mulvenna".

Kate Mulvenna
Head of Pharmacy Function/ Corporate Pharmaceutical Unit.
Primary Care Reimbursement Service

Recommendations for a Pharmacy Continuity Plan in response to the current Coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19)

Pharmacists and pharmacies play a key role in supporting public health and in particular are recognised as a valuable resource for members of the public who are seeking reassurance and information. Pharmacies have a pivotal role to play in ensuring the continuity of medicines supply and ongoing support to patients as we all seek to address the significant challenges associated with COVID-19.

The current Coronavirus outbreak presents a number of risks to the continuity of the activities of pharmacies. The possible impact of the absence of pharmacist(s) and other pharmacy staff is a major factor that requires consideration by the Pharmacy owner(s), superintendent and supervising pharmacists. This document is designed to assist you in making contingency plans to prepare for the challenges ahead.

Pharmacy Owners, superintendent and supervising pharmacists should also ensure that all pharmacy staff inform and update themselves appropriately regarding the management of the Coronavirus outbreak and that adequate hygiene measures and facilities are in place in the pharmacy.

It is important that you are kept safe and informed in these challenging times. All pharmacists and pharmacy staff should be encouraged to refer on a daily basis to the Health Protections Surveillance Centre (HPSC) Website where the most up to date advice will be provided on a regular if not daily basis.

The Pharmacy Profession and its network will play a critical role in the continuity of supply of medicines and healthcare advice. It is recognised that there may be significant patient pressure at this time, however patients and the general public are asked not to seek supplies of medicines over and above their normal requirements. It is vital that stockpiling at pharmacy or patient level does not occur. Doing so will disrupt existing stock levels and hamper the supply of medicines for others.

No medicine shortages currently affecting the Irish market are resulting from the impact of COVID-19 in third countries. There is no evidence to suggest that Ireland is likely to face general medicines supply issues now, or in the near future, as a result of any potential delays in the supply chain caused by COVID-19 related issues. However, this is based on normal use of medicines.

Healthcare professionals are asked to follow the guidance issued by the HSE and the Health Protections Surveillance Centre on their websites and to monitor for updates. Healthcare professionals with prescriptive authority are advised to follow models of care and treatment algorithms outlined there and not to undertake unilateral or localised actions contrary to these evidence-based, public health approaches.

- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/>
- <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/> for healthcare professionals
- <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html> for patients and the wider general public.

Your assistance in signposting trusted sources of information to patients and the general public would be appreciated.

Business Continuity Planning

- Pharmacy owners together with superintendent and supervising pharmacist(s) should take responsibility for the preparation of a contingency plan for the operation of the pharmacy in the event of pharmacist(s) or pharmacy staff absence.
- This plan should identify the critical activities, both clinical and functional, of the pharmacy, and the employees and inputs required to maintain them.
- The impact of staff absences (both pharmacists and non-pharmacist staff) on the operation of the pharmacy should be considered and contingency arrangements outlined. Some employees may have special needs during this outbreak and these should be considered where appropriate.
- Consideration should be given in the plan to what steps will be required to be taken if:
 - (a) the pharmacy remains open with reduced staff levels or
 - (b) the pharmacy has to close.
- Particularly high-risk and vulnerable patients should be identified and consideration given to specific arrangements that may need to be made about the continuing care of these patients in the event the pharmacy has to close. Consideration should also be given to the continuing care of patients in residential care settings.
- With regard to staff absences, the following questions need to be addressed as part of the decision-making on whether adequate staff levels are in place to allow continuity of the operation of the pharmacy on that particular day. The minimum number of staff required to operate the pharmacy safely should be considered - if the staff numbers fall below this level, the pharmacy may need to be closed.
- Protection of the workforce to prevent fatigue is vital to ensure ongoing patient care.

Non-pharmacist staff absence

- Can existing staff work overtime?
- Can part-time staff increase their hours?
- Can seasonal/temporary staff cover the absence?
- Can new temporary staff be recruited?
- Can staff be 'borrowed' from another pharmacy in the group?

Pharmacist staff absence

- Is another pharmacist available to open the pharmacy (if the usual key-holder is absent)?
- Can a locum pharmacist be sourced?
- Can part-time pharmacists provide extra cover?
- Can a pharmacist be sourced from another pharmacy in the group?
- Can the pharmacy open reduced hours?

- If there are reduced, but adequate, staff levels to allow for the operation of the pharmacy, consideration should be given to the following:

- Prioritise the critical clinical and functional activities and assign responsibilities as appropriate.
- Consider the security of the pharmacy premises and staff if operating at reduced staff levels.
- It may be necessary to close off access to certain areas within the pharmacy, to ensure adequate staff levels are focussed at the dispensary and the medicines counter area.
- Service levels will be impacted if staff numbers are reduced – it is important that the public and patients are informed about the situation and asked for their cooperation. The HPSC website is an important reference source for both healthcare professionals, patients and the general public.
- Ensure all staff, especially pharmacists, have adequate breaks.
- The dispensing of certain prescriptions may be prioritised, e.g. for regular monthly prescriptions which are not required urgently, patients may be asked to call back, allowing more urgent prescriptions and patients to be dealt with immediately.
- Prescriptions should continue to be dispensed in a safe manner. COVID-19 does not place any increased urgency on the vast majority of prescriptions and patient expectations should be managed as such. Patients concerned about congregating in the pharmacy for a period of time should be asked to return at an appropriate time or to wait in their vehicle in line with HPSC guidance. Pharmacists' time and professional judgement should be protected in the interests of patient safety.
- Methadone patients may be allocated specific time-slots to reduce pressure on the dispensary.

- If there is no pharmacist (or staff levels are too low for safe operation of the pharmacy), the pharmacy will be closed temporarily or open for shorter or limited hours. If closing the pharmacy, the following points should be considered:

- Alert your HSE Primary Care Pharmacist that the pharmacy is closed. They will feed pharmacy closure information to the national repository. The HSE information line will be an important source of information in the event of a significant number of pharmacy closures.
- Alert neighbouring pharmacies that you are closed and that your patients will be referred to them.
- Alert local GPs that you are closed.
- Alert the local Garda Síochána, if appropriate, as the public may seek information from them.
- Alert the PSI that you are closed - via rpbreg@psi.ie
- Remember to let all of the above know when you re-open your pharmacy.
- Place a public notice in the window advising patients where the nearest pharmacies are and give a contact number for the pharmacist who will be dealing with queries in relation to accessing prescriptions, patient medication records (PMRs) and other clinical information. Put a similar message on the pharmacy answer phone.

- In the event that a pharmacist cannot be physically present at the premises, consideration should be given to nominating staff member(s) to remain in the (closed) pharmacy to facilitate emergency access to Patient Medication Records and / or prescriptions if requested by the patient or a neighbouring pharmacy. Care should be taken in relation to patient confidentiality and the safe custody of medicines.
- Speak to the Drug Treatment Centre/Methadone Liaison at local level regarding re-allocation of your methadone patients to neighbouring pharmacies, if appropriate.
- Identify any High Tech medicines in stock and arrange to transfer to a neighbouring pharmacy if necessary.
- Ensure that all staff has access to required telephone numbers to facilitate all of the above communication.

- **Ensure that all staff is familiar with the contingency plan.**

- Ensure there is an up-to-date contact phone list for use in emergencies, e.g. other staff, other pharmacists including locums, GPs, Primary Care Pharmacist, the PSI, mobile numbers for pharmacists from other pharmacies, etc.
- Cross-train staff where necessary, giving consideration to the expertise required for some activities, e.g. opening/closing pharmacy, setting alarm, cashing up, using dispensary computer, access to PMRs, dispensary ordering, special orders, etc.
- Nominate deputies for each critical activity in the pharmacy.
- Information for employers and the supports available for staff during the outbreak is available at www.dbei.ie
- Review relevant pharmacy SOPs in relation to responsible persons for critical tasks.

- Discuss with the local pharmacy owners, superintendant and supervising pharmacists from local pharmacies your individual plans and agree how you will work together to ensure patient care and safety in the event of pharmacy closures. Local arrangements for late nights and weekends may also need to be reviewed and contingencies agreed in the event of pharmacy closures due to the outbreak. The dissemination of relevant information about these arrangements to the public and local communities should also be discussed and agreed.