

From the Chief Medical Officer
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BY EMAIL

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Dear Colleague

**AVAILABILITY OF LATERAL FLOW DEVICES FOR VISITORS TO HOSPITALS
IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

The benefits of hospital in-patients receiving visitors are well documented, they include improving the patient's emotional wellbeing and potentially assisting in the patient's care and recovery.

On the 30 April 2021, the Department published visiting guidance for all healthcare settings which took effect from 7 May 2021. The visiting guidance confirms that visits for hospital in-patients should currently be safely facilitated even in these most challenging of times. While the [Pathway](#) represents the expected visiting arrangements which should be facilitated in certain, prescribed circumstances, local decisions may be made to reinstate some restrictions for limited periods to protect patients, families and staff.

Any visiting restrictions being implemented in addition to those outlined in the [Pathway](#), must be kept under regular review by the appropriate HSCT, to allow for a reversion to the permissions outlined in the regional visiting guidance document at the earliest opportunity.

Importantly, the Pathway highlights that anyone showing or experiencing the symptoms of COVID-19 or of any other infection **must not visit a hospital**. Similarly, individuals who have been in contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19 **must not visit a hospital**. In such circumstances, the individual should remain at home and follow the latest Public Health advice on self-isolation and testing for COVID-19.

[Availability of testing for visitors](#)

Testing is one of our main pillars of protection against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In Northern Ireland, we continuously review and expand the scope of COVID-19 testing services as appropriate, and in line with latest medical and scientific guidance. Rapid testing of **asymptomatic individuals** using Lateral Flow Devices (LFDs), on a

regular basis, can reduce the risk of COVID-19 by identifying people who might be carrying the SARS-CoV-2 virus but who are not showing symptoms.

The purpose of this letter is to advise that LFD testing kits can currently be obtained easily and free of charge in Northern Ireland. When a patient's loved one makes an arrangement to visit them in hospital, we would encourage hospital staff to draw visitors' attention to the availability of LFD testing. Hospital staff should explain to visitors that testing using LFDs is optional, but is encouraged as a valuable, additional mitigation to enhance safety. **It is key to stress again that any individual displaying symptoms of COVID-19 should immediately self-isolate, make arrangements to get a PCR test and should not visit a hospital under any circumstances.**

Testing as an additional mitigation

It is important to highlight that LFD testing is encouraged as **an additional support** to visitors and healthcare providers by way of support for visiting. While a LFD test for COVID-19 may help reduce the risk associated with visiting, acting as an additional mitigating measure, it does not completely remove the risk of infection. Regardless of the LFD result obtained, visitors and healthcare staff must continue to adhere to the full suite of public health measures currently in place – including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), social distancing, good hand hygiene, and other robust infection prevention and control (IPC) measures.

Visitors who choose to avail of LFD testing should arrange to undertake twice weekly self-testing in the comfort of their own home. It is important that all visitors who undertake LFD testing report the result of their test, irrespective of whether the LFD test is positive, negative or void. To report an LFD test result, the visitor can either: type the following into their internet browser <https://www.gov.uk/report-covid19-result> or [alternatively phone 119](tel:119) (free from mobiles and landlines) from 7am to 11pm.

There are a number of additional important factors for healthcare staff to bear in mind in the context of use of LFD tests:

- The Innova COVID-19 test kits in use across Northern Ireland, which are provided in packs of 7, have received approval from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) for asymptomatic self-testing, finding positive cases in individuals who do not have symptoms of COVID-19.
- LFD testing for hospital visitors is an additional mitigation alongside the full suite of public health measures currently in place, which must continue to be followed. Whilst the use of LFD tests is important as an additional measure, even with a negative LFD test result, it is imperative that visitors do not drop their guard. People should not change their behaviours and must continue to adhere to all required IPC measures and Public Health guidance.
- LFD testing for visitors is not mandatory and hospitals cannot insist that visitors undergo a LFD test before visiting. Not wishing or not being able to take a LFD test, will not be an obstacle to a hospital visit.

- It is essential that visitors are advised that **if they receive a positive LFD test result, they must not visit the hospital under any circumstances.**
- Any individual who has a positive LFD test should immediately self-isolate and book a confirmatory PCR test in line with current guidance. Information on booking a PCR test is available at the following link:
<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>.

Information on how visitors can order LFD testing tests kits is set out below:

LFD test kits can be ordered online for free delivery to a person's home at:
<https://www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-rapid-lateral-flow-tests>

LFD test kits can also be collected from a number of locations across Northern Ireland: [Find where to get rapid lateral flow tests - NHS \(test-and-trace.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk/healthcare-professionals/rapid-lateral-flow-tests)

An **Information Sheet** about the availability of LFD testing which hospital staff can print and give out to hospital visitors is attached at **Annex A**.

Adherence to the range of measures and guidance as set out above, will allow us all to continue to safely maintain a balance between infection control and the very important benefits of visiting to the health and wellbeing of hospital in-patients.

We appreciate these continue to be challenging times for us all and we recognise the continuing pressures on our health and social care system. We would like to take this opportunity to once again thank you all for your commitment and dedication to serving the needs of patients across our hospital system in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



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Chief Medical Officer



Prof Charlotte McArdle
Chief Nursing Officer

cc: Sean Holland CSWO - DoH
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Availability of Rapid COVID-19 Testing for Hospital Visitors in Northern Ireland

Friends and family play an important role in supporting a patient's emotional wellbeing and helping them in their recovery.

Rapid Lateral Flow Device (LFD) testing for visitors **who do not have any COVID-19 symptoms** is available as an additional support to the existing range of public health measures which are already in place across hospitals.

We would encourage all visitors to undertake LFD self-testing (twice a week, every 3 to 4 days) prior to visiting, not only to protect themselves but also importantly to help protect their loved ones who are currently in hospital.

If you have symptoms of COVID-19 you must not visit the hospital under any circumstances. You should immediately self-isolate and book a PCR test in the usual way.

What is a Lateral Flow Device (LFD) Test?

A rapid **LFD test** is a test for people **without symptoms** of COVID-19. It is easy to take and is carried out in the comfort of your own home. It is designed to quickly and reliably tell you if you are infectious with the virus. It gives a quick result (in as little as 30 minutes) and uses a device similar to a pregnancy test.

Benefits for you and your close contacts of taking a regular LFD Test

About 1 in 3 people with COVID-19 do not have symptoms but can still infect others. Even if you are fully vaccinated, there is still a chance you can pick up and pass COVID-19 to other people.

Rapid LFD tests for COVID-19 have an important role in detecting cases in people who are infected but are showing no symptoms and may be unwittingly passing the virus on to others.

LFD tests are effective at picking up those who are most infectious. Testing twice a week and on a regular basis with LFDs increases their detection rate.

This means that regular testing helps to protect you, your family and those that you come into contact with. It also helps to make the hospital environment a safer place for everyone, including you.

How do I order LFD Tests?

LFD Tests are currently free and can be ordered online for free delivery to your home <https://www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-rapid-lateral-flow-tests>

You can also order LFD tests for collection in a number of locations across Northern Ireland: [Find where to get rapid lateral flow tests - NHS \(test-and-trace.nhs.uk\)](https://www.test-and-trace.nhs.uk)

[You can also phone 119](https://www.nhs.uk/119) (free from mobiles and landlines) from 7am to 11pm to order LFD tests.

How do I carry out a LFD Test?

To take the LFD test you must rub a long cotton bud (swab) over your tonsils (or where they would have been) and inside your nose. This is then mixed with a solution and applied to the test strip to give a reading.

Further information is provided along with your test and should be followed closely.

Additional guidance on how to use the test can be found by typing the following into your internet browser <https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test>

What should I do after I get the results of the test?

It is important to report the result from your LFD test **in all cases** regardless of your result. This will help our health service to monitor the virus most effectively.

To report your LFD test result, please type the following into your internet browser <https://www.gov.uk/report-covid19-result> or you can [phone 119](https://www.nhs.uk/119) (free from mobiles and landlines) from 7am to 11pm to report your LFD test result.

What should I do if my test is positive?

In the event of a positive LFD test **please do not visit the hospital.**

If you test positive with an LFD test, you should immediately self-isolate and arrange to get a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test to confirm the result of your LFD test.

A PCR test is used to diagnose people who are infected with COVID-19. It can be sent to your home or you can book an appointment at a walk-in or drive-through test centre.

To arrange for a PCR test to be sent to your home or to arrange an appointment, please refer to the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test>

You can also book a PCR test by phoning **119** (free from mobiles and landlines) from 7am to 11pm.