

Regarding the Response to COVID-19 Going Forward

17th February 2022

Oita Prefecture Novel Coronavirus Infection Countermeasure Headquarters
Oita Prefecture Emergency Socio-Economic Revitalisation Headquarters

In response to the highly infectious Omicron variant, Oita Prefecture has implemented 'Semi-Emergency Coronavirus Measures' alongside a one-off 'Period of Concentrated Short-Term Coronavirus Countermeasures' over the last weekend. With the understanding and cooperation of residents, we have seen signs of improvement in the situation surrounding infection within the prefecture.

During this period we have endeavoured to strengthen our testing infrastructure as a prefecture and have expanded our number of free testing sites for a total of 54, as well as distributed rapid antigen test kits to schools and social welfare facilities. Furthermore, in addition to the 508 hospital beds that have been made available, the number of overnight recuperation facilities has been expanded to 11 that provide a total of 1,360 rooms for patients. The prefecture has also made a sustained effort to expand infrastructure for the provision of medical care alongside building a system for at-home recuperation that will allow for peace-of-mind whilst recovering. Additionally, considerable progress has been made in the administration of the additional third vaccination dose to medical staff and the elderly, as well as essential workers such as teaching staff, nursery staff, and police officers.

Further, the cooperation of restaurants, bars, and pubs with regard to the shortening of business hours has resulted in both a significant decrease in infections arising from group dining situations, as well as the elimination of cluster infections resulting from group dining situations.

Alongside the aforementioned results of the countermeasures, the intensive care hospital bed occupancy rate of 0% has been maintained, whilst the hospital bed occupancy rate, that for a time exceeded 46%, has continued to decrease, falling below 37%.

A total of 39 clusters have occurred in early childhood education and childcare facilities in the region, with many also occurring in nursing homes. Thorough implementation of effective infection prevention measures regarding these facilities for young children and the elderly is therefore a necessity. We ask for those involved with these facilities to cooperate with measures as outlined in point 'I'.

On that note, as the regulations imposed upon dining establishments and events during

this Semi-State of Emergency have given us the results we expected, we will be asking the national government to lift the Semi-State of Emergency on 20th February as planned. With regard to the Omicron variant, please note that it is still necessary follow infection countermeasures and take appropriate precautions, so please continue to cooperate on countermeasures in accordance with point II. Additionally, it is also necessary to proceed with the re-stimulation of socioeconomic activity, and we therefore make a special request for your understanding with regard to point III.

I. Prioritised measures

We will be strengthening priority countermeasures relating to early childhood education and childcare facilities, and nursing homes. To protect our children and elderly, we ask that you all please cooperate with the measures outlined below.

1. Regarding nurseries and childcare facilities

All over the country, nurseries and childcare facilities have been especially prone to outbreaks during this sixth wave of infection due to the Omicron variant. In this prefecture specifically, there have been infections in 38% of nurseries and other early childhood education settings and the occurrence of many cluster infections.

While the number of early childhood education and childcare facilities temporarily closing due to the occurrence of infection increases, it is extremely important to ensure the continued functioning of this vital social service whilst preventing widespread infection in their facilities.

Therefore, from now until 6th March, if there is even one positive case within a class and there is concern that the infection will spread, please refrain from having children go to that class for five days. Furthermore, please be aware there is support available from the national government in cases where municipalities have made provision for alternative facilities.

In addition, please avoid activities that will involve children crowding together, as the risk of infection from such activities is high. Alongside this, please do your best to minimise infection rates in general, for example, by dividing classes of children into smaller groups.

Further, please refrain from holding events that involve talking loudly, or that will have a large number of participants. In particular, please cancel or postpone events where parents or guardians of children will be in attendance.

Within the prefecture, there have been rapid-spreading cluster infections that have occurred in early childhood education and childcare facilities because

children with light symptoms, little more than a runny nose, attended class. Please cooperate in preventing the spread of infection by having children stay home from childcare facilities if even one member of their family is feeling under the weather.

We also request that employers give special consideration to employees who have children and allow for them to take time off of work if necessary for child-raising purposes.

2. Regarding nursing homes

In nursing homes, if there is even one positive case, the probability of it subsequently turning into a cluster is high; within the prefecture, 17 such clusters have occurred in this 6th wave of infections. There is particular concern surrounding serious infection when it comes to the elderly.

Therefore, 10,000 additional rapid antigen test kits will be distributed to facilities such as special nursing care homes. Staff with close contact to residents of these facilities must all take a rapid antigen test at once, regardless of whether they have symptoms or not.

Additionally, please get your third vaccination dose as soon as possible if you are a resident or staff member of a nursing home.

3. Regarding the vaccine

The third vaccination dose will not only offer you protection, but will also help protect your loved ones as well. It is of paramount importance in preventing both the spread of the Omicron variant and the development of severe symptoms in infected persons. Municipalities are currently sending out vaccination tickets to their residents, beginning with those where six months have passed since their second vaccination dose. From here on, more and more people should be receiving vaccination tickets. Those who receive their ticket are asked to receive their vaccination at a close-by medical facility or COVID-19 vaccination site as soon as possible. In addition, for the time being, the Prefectural Vaccination Centre will be expanding its operation hours from the weekends (Thursday to Sunday) to the entire week in order to accelerate the rate of vaccinations.

II. Thorough compliance with fundamental infection countermeasures

In the fight against the Omicron variant, prevention measures such as ensuring continuous ventilation, observing the appropriate usage of masks, and avoiding overcrowding are vital. Especially when indoors, please wear non-woven fabric masks, which have a higher level of effectiveness in preventing infection, rather than masks made of cloth or urethane

foam. Additionally, make sure the mask is fit snugly against your nose, leaving no gap. Please be careful when putting on and wearing masks, as if your nose is not properly covered by said mask, you cannot expect any effectiveness in terms of infection prevention.

1. Regarding outings

When leaving your house, please avoid crowded areas as well as areas with a high risk of transmission, such as places that are poorly ventilated or that will require yelling or speaking loudly. To the best of your ability, please also avoid all non-essential travel to and from regions where infection rates are high and or on the rise.

2. Regarding schools

In schools, along with working on ways to avoid crowding as much as is possible, please closely follow infection countermeasures such as avoiding both face-to-face and physical contact as best you can. In order to avoid crowding to and from school, bus transport will continue for the time being. Further, please endeavour to prevent the spread of infection by taking appropriate steps such as making use of rapid antigen test kits, and not hesitating to keep your child back from school if they or a family member have symptoms of any kind. Attending school while having symptoms and participating in educational activities without wearing a mask have been large factors in the spread of infection. We ask again that schools and individual households thoroughly comply with fundamental infection countermeasures. In addition, we ask that after school childcare clubs cooperate closely with schools to prevent the spread of the virus. High school and other entrance examinations will continue according to plan. If a student is unable to take an exam due to becoming infected or due to other circumstances along those lines, remedial measures such as make-up exams are being planned, so we ask that students rest assured and focus on their preparations.

3. Regarding group dining

The prefecture will no longer request for the shortening of hours or the suspension of serving alcoholic beverages. However, group dining has been a source of infection, so when dining in a group, please ensure that you choose dining establishments that closely follow infection countermeasures, such as providing apt ventilation. Such establishments are certified under the 'Reassurance is Appetising PLUS' (安心はおいしいプラス) scheme. Finally, please ensure that in group dining situations you abide by infection countermeasures such as wearing a mask when talking with others; arranging

seating such that there is ample space between party members with no overcrowding, for example, by keeping party members to 4 or less per table; and not moving from your seat.

4. Regarding karaoke

The risk of airborne infection during karaoke is extremely high, and has resulted in the repeated occurrence of cluster infections. Please follow infection countermeasures as closely as possible. These include choosing karaoke establishments that comply with general business guidelines; wearing a mask; and booking an individual room for your family.

III. Socioeconomic recovery

1. Travel within the prefecture

Please feel free to take your time and relax at lodging facilities and hot springs that are properly complying with infection countermeasures. Make sure that you also comply with fundamental infection countermeasures yourself and avoid crowded areas. In addition, the ‘New Oita Travel Discount’ (新しいおおいの旅割), which had been temporarily suspended as part of the Semi-Emergency Coronavirus Measures, will be taking new reservations from residents and can be utilised starting on 21st February, with the period of use also being extended to 31st March. However, for the time being usage will be limited to only Oita residents. Usage by residents of neighbouring prefectures is currently under deliberation and is being discussed with the governments of said prefectures.

2. Assistance for businesses

When they are prepared to do so, municipalities will begin the sale of ¥13 billion worth of ‘Premium Gift Certificates’. Please use these certificates at a wide range of stores and dining establishments in this prefecture.

In addition, businesses and business operators who seen a loss of sales of more than 30% due to the COVID-19 pandemic may apply for benefits from the Business Revival Aid Fund (事業復活支援金) for up to ¥2.5 million for business entities and up to ¥500,000 for individual business proprietors. Applications for these benefits began on 31st January. If these circumstances apply to you or your business, please utilise this service.

Applications for the fifth round of subsidies for dining establishments who cooperated with our request for the shortening of business hours from 27th January to 20th February will also begin on 21st February. These subsidies will usually be received 13-15 days after applying.

We are requesting for Semi-Emergency Coronavirus Measures to end on 20th February. However, do not underestimate the Omicron variant. It is extremely infectious. We have avoided overwhelming our hospitals and medical facilities, but children and the elderly are still becoming infected. If we let down our guard, there is a strong chance that infections will increase once again. In order to nip this outbreak in the bud, we ask each and every one of you for your continued cooperation and understanding.