



SARSCoV2 (COVID-19)

ST HELENA ISLAND



LIVING WITH COVID

Bulletin 4

LIVING WITH COVID– WHAT DOES IT MEAN contd



Dr Peter Moss has been a consultant in infectious diseases since 1999. He has worked within the full range of infectious diseases, and was the Director of Infection Prevention and Control for more than 10 years. Since 2020 much of his time has been devoted to managing patients with COVID-19. Dr Moss will be issuing a series of bulletins to help inform the public of the medical background of COVID-19. These bulletins are aimed to help provide reassurance and advice to the community during the transition towards eventually 'Living with COVID'.

What does 'Living with COVID' mean in practice? In general it means getting on with ordinary daily life without thinking too much about the new virus infection that is around. We don't need to think about it too much because for most people it is not really going to affect their lives (at least no more than the usual coughs and colds with which we are all familiar). However this is a new virus, and it is one which has caused a huge amount of publicity and anxiety around the world. It is completely understandable that many people don't yet feel ready to live with COVID in the same way that they 'live with' the common cold.

The most important thing to remember is that COVID now is not the same as COVID in the UK in 2020. The strain of the virus then was much more dangerous, and we had no treatments or vaccine. Even then most people catching COVID didn't get seriously ill, but some were hospitalised and there were many thousands of deaths related to COVID in the UK between March and June 2020. A second wave of COVID with a different strain caused a smaller number of deaths between December 2020 and February 2021. Since then, as the virus has become less dangerous, and more people have been vaccinated, the number of people getting seriously ill and ending up in hospital with COVID has fallen significantly. This doesn't mean that COVID has gone away: in fact the highly infectious new variants Omicron BA4/5 mean that there are now more people in the UK infected with COVID than ever before. However despite more people being infected, the number of people needing to be admitted to hospital has fallen dramatically.

What does this mean for St Helena? Based on other countries we can expect most people on St Helena to be exposed to the virus within a matter of weeks, no matter what we do. 'Locking down' the island, restricting movement and gatherings, might slow down the spread but it would not change the eventual result that most people will catch the virus at some point. If we were to continue with restrictive movement, we would then create other problems to include difficulty for people to earn a living, access to essential goods, and even accessing medical care. During the 'lockdown' in the UK we saw an increase in people dying from 'everyday' illnesses because normal medical services were shut down. Given that the virus will spread anyway, it is better to try to keep normal life going as far as possible.

At the same time it will be easier for Health and other services to continue to operate if the virus spreads more slowly over a period of weeks rather than days, hence there will be some measures implemented in an effort to reduce the spread a little: it is a balancing act. If people have symptoms of COVID and test positive they will be asked to remain at home for 5 days: this is the time when they are most likely to spread the virus to other people if they are out and about. (People who have the virus but who have no symptoms at all - about 50% of adults - are less likely to pass it on to other people.) There will be no formal restriction on public gatherings, but you may wish to make your own choice and avoid big groups or crowded places, especially indoors. Mask wearing will not be compulsory (except in health and social care settings), but if you feel more comfortable wearing a mask, it will be your choice. What we have seen in other countries is that at first a lot of people do choose to wear masks and avoid public crowds, but as time goes on people start to feel more relaxed and go back to normal life.

**Dr Peter Moss, MD FRCP DTMH
Chief Medical Officer,
Health Services Directorate
13 July 2022**