

# NEW DAWN



Photo / Dean Purcell

Post-Covid era begins as PM announces end to most restrictions, but some health experts have misgivings

**Michael Neilson**

**T**he Government's decision to drop most Covid-19 rules from today has received broad political and business support but left some health experts questioning the ability to tackle future outbreaks.

Today marks a new era, with restrictions – and the prospect of them – that have dominated daily lives dropped, giving New Zealanders back “certainty” after nearly three years.

From midnight the Covid-19 Protection Framework, or traffic-light system, was turned off, removing most mask requirements and the ability for the Government to introduce measures like gathering restrictions.

All the Government's vaccine mandates will end on September 26, including those for new arrivals in the country. Employers can continue their own mandates.

Face coverings will no longer be required on any Air New Zealand-operated flights from today, though masks may still be required on some outbound international flights, the airline said.

The moves have broad political and business support, with the Opposition long calling for restrictions to be dropped.

But some health experts have aired concerns about effects on vul-

nerable populations and our ability

to deal with future waves of Covid.

Government support partner the Green Party accused the Government of having “given up” on combating the virus and not focusing on immunocompromised and disabled people.

It has been 906 days since the Alert Level System was introduced on March 21, 2020. This was then

replaced by the traffic-light system on December 3 last year.

Instead of moving from current orange setting to green, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced yesterday the system was being removed entirely.

She said with its focus on gathering restrictions, the system was no longer fit for purpose.

Two tools remained – masks and isolation periods for positive cases.

From today, only positive cases will need to isolate for seven days. Masks will be required only in health and aged-care settings.

But both these measures could be “dialled up or down” as required, Ardern said, also warning of potential for cases to rise again before the

year's end. “Rather than feeling that Covid dictates what happens to us, our lives, and our futures, we take back control,” she said.

“There is no question – thousands of lives have been saved by the efforts of Kiwis.”

Ardern said the decisions were based on health advice, with case numbers and hospitalisations the lowest they'd been since February.

Vaccination levels were also high and there was increased access to anti-viral medicines, she said.

Act party leader David Seymour welcomed the end of Covid restrictions which “the Government has clung on to for far too long”.

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Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister

## Post-Covid era begins as most rules scrapped

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Seymour called for an independent investigation into the Government's Covid response to fully understand the damage the restrictions had caused.

Greens Covid-19 spokesman Teanau Tuiono said strong public health measures remained essential and today's decision would leave people wondering if the Government had given up.

The near-complete removal of long-standing protections would be of considerable concern for immunocompromised and disabled whānau whose wellbeing should be at the centre of the Government's response, Tuiono said.

“What is certain is that Covid and other respiratory illnesses are here to stay. We will be living with new waves of the infection for many years to come,” he said.

“Focus must immediately shift to slowing the spread of Covid-19

through long-term protective public health measures, alongside equal access to all future vaccines.”

Epidemiologist Michael Baker said he was happy to see masking requirements kept in healthcare and aged-care facilities – as had already been signalled.

But he was disappointed they no longer needed to be worn on public transport, which he described as a “crowded, contained and contact environment”.

Baker questioned the decision to lift vaccination mandates – including for healthcare workers – as well as vaccination requirements for air crew and travellers entering the country.

With perhaps 2 per cent of travellers carrying the virus, he said this could be an ongoing source to seed new outbreaks here over time.

Baker's biggest criticism, however, was the lack of a new framework, now that the Government had decided to drop the traffic-light system.

“The immediate problem is that

Covid-19 is highly likely to produce new waves in the medium term, that may or may not be more severe than what we've seen,” he said.

“So I just think it's a missed opportunity not to actually continue that idea [of a framework].”

Business New Zealand chief executive Kirk Hope said it was a good decision to drop the broad-based restrictions.

“As we've learned over the past three years, New Zealand's Covid response has needed to flex as the pandemic evolved,” he said.

“Taking into account public health, the economy and people's accepted level of risk has been a constant balancing act.”

Auckland Chamber of Commerce chief executive Simon Bridges said the move would send a signal that the country was ready to welcome back students, investors, tourists, and skilled workers and it would give locals confidence to get out into the community.