

Statement by the Minister of Health, Mr Constantinos Ioannou, on the decisions of the Council of Ministers regarding the pandemic

The epidemiological data of the last two weeks were presented and examined today at the meeting of the Council of Ministers and the current situation has been evaluated.

The epidemiological data and the data of public hospitals show that the situation is at a turning point.

1. The situation in the community remains epidemiologically deteriorating, with a more intense burden in the District of Lemesos.
2. There is a strong increase in transmission in the community and especially in areas with large crowds, such as primary schools, workplaces (private and public sectors), as well as increased transmission within the family.
3. The increased transmission and illness are now linked to the British mutant strain, which is found in the community and as the data from the ECDC samples' analysis so far show, its incidence rate is 25.7%.
4. The epidemiological picture in primary schools, island-wide is burdened, with extremely alarming data in the District of Lemesos.
5. As far as workplaces are concerned, there are clusters in all areas, such as services companies, banks, accounting firms, advisory services, human resources departments and the public sector.
6. From the analysis of the admissions/hospitalizations of the last days, most of the transmissions took place within a family or friendly environment, as well as in workplaces, while the average age has decreased, observing admissions in healthy younger people who develop severe cardiorespiratory symptoms and require hospitalization.

The burdened epidemiological picture and the increase in the number of hospitalized patients cause concern and call us to be vigilant. If admissions continue at this rate, our primary goal of **protecting the Health System** will be jeopardized, along with the good performance we have achieved all this time and our primary goal of saving lives.

On the other hand, we listen to the strong concerns of experts that **psychological fatigue is widespread throughout society, after a year in unprecedented and difficult conditions, and that the measures may not have worked due to this fatigue.**

The stake we have before us is to reconcile all the concerns and find the right balance so that we can move towards the end of this health crisis, safely.

Following an assessment of the above and taking into account, on one hand the increasing burden of the epidemiological picture and on the other, the low level of compliance both at an individual and a collective level, as determined by the analysis of the Tracing Team, and taking into account the views of the Scientific Advisory Committee and the Head of the Committee for the Psychological Support Of Citizens from the effects of the pandemic, the Council of Ministers has decided that the measures should focus on the following two pillars:

a) First pillar: (validity period 16-31 March): Targeted measures in indoor areas with increased clusters of cases and a high transmission risk (offices, primary schools, residences etc.) **in an attempt to curb the spreading in such areas:**

i) The 25% for service-providing businesses is reinstated with a readjustment of the weekly rapid test programme to cover the 25% of the employees of such businesses and a simultaneous reinforcement of supervision and checks.

ii) Taking into consideration that children are carriers with an increased risk of transmission/dispersion and delays in their detection as they are mostly asymptomatic, along with an inability to impose diagnostic tests, rendering them silent carriers with the risk of spreading the virus with increased clusters of cases, and given the fact that in the Primary Schools of the District of Lemesos there are many clusters of cases, it has been decided to **suspend the operation, with physical presence, of the Primary Schools of the District of Lemesos until 31 March.**

iii) **The suspension of operation with physical presence of Gymnasiums, across Cyprus, is extended over the next two weeks** (until 31.03.2021) in order to prevent the outbreak of cases.

b) Second pillar: Measures aimed at increasing citizens' compliance while promoting their psychological recovery:

i) **As of Monday, 15 March**, access to squares and parks is allowed for up to 6 persons with the mandatory use of a facemask for persons from different households.

ii) **Only for Monday, 15 March**, access to picnic areas and dams is allowed.

iii) **As of Tuesday, 16 March**, only the outdoor areas of catering establishments are reopening on the basis of a strict protocol which will be published and in compliance with the measures for distancing and the health guidelines.

iv) **As of Tuesday, 16 March**, the curfew time is extended from 9 pm to 11 pm.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Armed with increased testing, tracing, monitoring and the rolling of the vaccination programme as well as the recommendations of the experts, we have focused on these two pillars in order to be able to carry on fighting the invisible enemy with your assistance. The situation is being monitored daily. The common goal which we must all set together is the improvement of the epidemiological picture in a way that allows us to return to everyday life with safe and steady steps. For the District of Lemesos in particular, our efforts must become even more intense and collective. The Government does not wish to reinstate measures and that is why we need the cooperation of all our fellow citizens.

It is our belief that we can curb the spread only with the **cooperation of the entire society**. Once again, we ask our fellow citizens for their **contribution and understanding**. The great sacrifices by all have brought fatigue and we acknowledge it. We now have the weapon of vaccination at our disposal and our need to return to normality as soon as possible is expressed in the **eagerness of thousands of our fellow citizens to be vaccinated**. The rate of vaccination that is accelerating and will increase in the coming weeks, **offers optimism for a safe continuation**. Until then, we kindly request that you **continue responsibly to comply with the measures** so that we, our brothers and sisters, our friends remain healthy. We must not forget the personal protective measures. Let us not relax that we have reached the end because, unfortunately, the epidemiological data of the last days confirms that a relaxation, a slip-up can, at any time, reverse the situation and take us back. We've proven that we have the maturity to achieve this. But it takes individual and collective discipline. Our lives, the lives of our loved ones are in our hands. We started together. It's only with your help that we can succeed.

12.03.2021