

**Statement by the Minister of Health, Mr Constantinos Ioannou, during
the announcement of the decisions of the Council of Ministers**

Thank you for being here today. Sunday marks one month since the first relaxations of the restrictive measures, and in today's meeting the Council of Ministers was informed of the effectiveness of the de-escalation so far, in order to determine the next steps of the strategy.

Specifically, the Council of Ministers, while remaining firm in its position that the measures should be lifted slowly, carefully and in a controlled manner, assessed the epidemiological picture as formulated over the last two weeks. In addition to the number of cases, the rate of positiveness and the cumulative impact, the situation in hospitals and the number of deaths were taken into consideration. As the data show, there has been a stabilization in the number of cases in the past 14 days, with a slight increase recorded in the last two days. The positive rate is close to 0.5 % with slight fluctuations.

The island-wide cumulative effect is still above the safe limit set by the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC), i.e. 164.3 per 100.000 inhabitants, recording a slight reduction compared to the previous fortnight. Individually in all districts, except Lemesos, where the burden is higher, the situation, although improved, remains at a marginal point, which can easily deteriorate.

In hospitals, the situation is manageable, but as we've said, it can get out of hand. The number of hospitalized patients records a slight decrease and our goal is, with perseverance and effort, for the decrease to continue in the coming period.

The strategy for the gradual lifting of restrictive measures is based on the triptych 'testing – tracing – vaccination', also taking into account the ECDC recommendations for close monitoring of virus mutations, which are of great concern at a European level. As the ECDC notes, new strains of the virus cause increased transmission and aggressive spread of the virus, which contributes to an increase in cases in communities. In order to limit the spread, the

recommendations of the European Agency are clear: Increased diagnostic tests in the population, tracing and acceleration of the vaccination coverage.

Based on the above, the Council of Ministers decided today the following, with effect as of Monday, 1 March:

1. Re-opening of public and private Lyceums and Technical Schools for 1st and 2nd Grade students, with physical presence.
2. Re-opening of conservatories, tutoring schools, educational centres, and other afternoon facilities, with physical presence of up to two people including the teacher (1 student and 1 teacher).
3. Re-opening of visual arts centres and galleries, according to the guidelines and the health protocol of the Ministry of Health.
4. Re-opening of gyms, dance schools and other indoor sports facilities, including swimming pools, based on the instructions and the protocol to be issued by the Cyprus Sports Organization.
5. Visits to Senior People's Homes are allowed, under the conditions set by the protocol of the Ministry of Labour.
6. Team training and matches of professional Division C championships are allowed, under the conditions that apply to professional Division A and B championships and according to the protocols of the Cyprus Football Association and the Cyprus Sports Organization.
7. Access to nature trails for physical exercise is allowed.
8. Street vending and flea markets other than food are allowed.

Additionally, **as of Monday, 8 March 2021:**

9. Re-opening of all levels of public and private Gymnasiums with the physical presence of pupils.

The aforementioned measures will be regulated by a Decree, and more clarifications will be provided within the day.

The epidemiological indicators are continuously being evaluated, and we all hope that course of improvement continues, so as to allow us to proceed with the lifting of more measures. Within this framework, for planning purposes, it is

expected that, as of Tuesday, 16 March 2021, inter alia, catering establishments will re-open on the basis of a special protocol which is being prepared by the Steering Committee and an evaluation of the total number of employees working with physical presence at service-providing companies and/or other businesses/sectors will take place. More details will be made available next week.

A key pillar for the success of the easing of measures is the proper monitoring of the implementation of health protocols. For the attainment of that objective, it has been decided that an Action Plan be prepared by all the involved Ministries and Deputy Ministries depending upon their areas of competence. This effort will be reinforced by the service purchase (hiring) of 260 persons, on the basis of the procedures set out by the Ministry of Commerce. Our goal is not to impose fines by monitoring the implementation of the measures. Our aim is to assist various businesses in finding **ways to implement the protocols properly and effectively** for the safe operation and for the protection of the health of their employees.

Over the last three weeks, in tandem with the resumption of sectors of the economy and society, we have been investing in the carrying out of mass testing through the use of antigen tests. The weekly screening of employees ensures the citizens' health, on the one hand, and on the other, the safe operation of businesses, by restricting the transmission of the virus at the workplace. More specifically, in the first three weeks of February, more than 600.000 rapid tests have been carried out, thus providing data on the prevalent image within the community in real time.

As far as vaccination is concerned, the Vaccination Plan is going according to plan. We have achieved a very important goal that we had set, having vaccinated 70% of people aged 80 and over, while we continue to increase the rate of vaccination of people aged 70 and over. March is a crucial month, as we expect to receive more than 160,000 vaccine doses, which translates into vaccination coverage for vulnerable groups along with vaccination by age group. That is why we proceeded with a prudent lifting of the measures, so that

we can benefit from the extra time next month for greater vaccination coverage of the population.

The vaccine is our only weapon to get out of the health crisis the soonest possible. Delayed vaccination of populations in all countries gives rise to virus mutations, resulting in an increase in hospitalizations and deaths. We are, once again, in a battle with time. Until we achieve our desired vaccination coverage rate, our only assets are the measures of social distancing and personal protection.

We often refer to health protocols and the need to comply with them. Measures and protocols are effective when applied carefully. We see it in practice and we know that it works. I understand that for a long time now, the fatigue that has befallen us all has made this goal more difficult. But if there is one thing we have learned in the last year, that we have been deprived of and sacrificed a lot, it is that together, with responsibility and discipline, we can all achieve our goals. At this stage we find ourselves in, the weapon of vaccination has come to strengthen our individual and collective effort.

We are near the end. Victory in this last battle will come with vaccination coverage. We proceed with steady and careful steps. We want the restarting to be successful and I am certain that this view reflects that of the whole of society. I ask you, dear fellow citizens, once again, to join forces in this final effort to curb the virus. And this time, let us continue with responsibility and seriousness, with a little more patience. Our common goal is to protect the health of each and every individual citizen. In the end, let us all be healthy together.

25/2/2021