

Opening statement by the Minister of Health, Mr Constantinos Ioannou, at the press conference about the new developments regarding COVID-19

Following the recent increase in COVID-19 cases in our country, I feel the need to speak to you again, in order to share with you the concerns of the scientific community, the Government and myself.

From the beginning of the health crisis, before the virus even knocked on the door of Cyprus, we chose the difficult path, and together with you we managed to be one of the few countries in the world that faced the pandemic in an exemplary way.

We based our pandemic management strategy on six key pillars:

- 1 informing and raising public awareness,
- 2 mass laboratory testing of groups of the general population, through programs that we have implemented and are still implementing,
- 3 tracking and investigating case contacts for immediate and timely intervention in breaking the chain,
- 4 strict control at the points of entry,
- 5 issuance of more than 90 health protocols, in accordance with ECDC and WHO recommendations,
- 6 close monitoring of the implementation of hygiene regulations.

At present, having formed the core of our strategy, we continue to conduct population screening programmes, to detect potential cases from the community, a practice that ranks us among the top EU countries in terms of number of tests to population ratio. We are constantly monitoring the situation and wherever we spot a need for intervention in the community through laboratory tests, we implement programs such as the last island wide program that we launched with emphasis on Lemesos, in places of mass gatherings. At this point, I would like to emphasize that after the latest results, there is a thought to increase the number.

In addition, since the decision to reopen the airports, a team of epidemiologists has been assessing the epidemiological profiles of countries and, in accordance with European Union guidelines, the various countries are categorized, with weekly updates. We are the only country in the EU, which applies three different categories of countries, a practice followed by Austria since Monday.

At the same time, we stepped up sampling checks at the points of entry. Every day we carry out laboratory tests on passengers from countries of Categories A and B. In combination with the mandatory negative test by Category B passengers, these samplings help us identify, at the points of entry, and isolate as many COVID-19 positive people as possible, thus preventing them from entering the community and transmitting the virus.

Without complacency, and in constant contact with the officials of the Ministry of Health and in close cooperation with the European Commissioner for Health, we are preparing for the autumn and for the worst. At the Ministry, we ordered the Influenza A vaccine in a timely manner, to cover vulnerable groups; we utilized the EU's common mechanism for treating the virus; we participate in the Joint Negotiation Process to enable the timely delivery of the COVID-19 vaccine for the population of Cyprus, which, unfortunately, as all indications show, will not be available before the beginning of 2021.

On the front of monitoring the implementation of the protocols, I must admit that in some cases there has been a relaxation on the part of the competent Services in controlling and enforcing the penalties provided for in the legislation. The instructions given again by my colleague, the Minister of Justice, to the competent parties are strict and clear for zero tolerance for those who violate the relevant Decrees.

[...]

For all the above reasons and in the context of our actions to limit the spread of the virus, in a meeting we had earlier with the Epidemiological Team, under the President of the Republic, the following additional measures were decided upon and apply on an island wide basis, effective from midnight tonight:

1. It becomes mandatory for the general population to use a mask indoors in crowded places (i.e. shopping malls, banks, supermarkets, hospitals, churches, etc.). In case of violation, the penalty is €300.
2. Sampling at airports increases from 600 to 1000 tests per day, with focus on Cypriot citizens who return from holiday trips, as it has been proven that a high percentage of coronavirus cases concerns Cypriots who have travelled abroad.
3. Hospitals, private and public, and nursing homes are advised to strictly apply the visitation regulations and, where possible, visits should be limited to the minimum.
4. The Police will intensify checks on persons who ought to be in self-isolation upon arrival from Category C countries, or close contacts of coronavirus cases. In coordination with the relevant authorities, daily checks will be performed on those persons.
5. Checks and surveillance of companies, catering establishments and other establishments will be intensified by the relevant authorities under instructions for show zero tolerance.

In addition to the above, specifically with regard to Lemesos and after the latest developments, in an effort to reduce the outbreaks and dismantle the transmission chains that were identified, the following measures were decided upon and will take effect from midnight tonight:

1. Restore the restriction on the maximum of 10 people at social gatherings.
2. Restore the restriction on the maximum number of people in catering establishments to 75 persons indoors and 150 persons outdoors, regardless of the square meters.
3. In churches, the presence of persons is determined on the basis of square meters according to the protocol, which regardless of this will not exceed 75 people.
4. The limitation of 50% occupancy in public transport vehicles (buses) is restored.

All the above measures regarding Lemesos will be valid for three weeks.

We all need to be more diligent in matters of personal protection, more careful in our movements and more alert of the disease and contact our Personal Doctor if we show symptoms.

[...]