

# Coronavirus COVID-19 emergency plan has been activated by the Government. Here's what that means for you

ABC Health & Wellbeing By health reporter [Olivia Willis](#)



While coronavirus is spreading globally, the risk to Australians remains low. (Getty Images: ArtistGNDphotography)

Amid fears the coronavirus outbreak will soon be declared a global pandemic, the Australian Government has pulled the trigger on its emergency response plan and is now operating on the basis the virus is a pandemic.

## Key points

- Australians encouraged to go about their ordinary business despite coronavirus concerns
- Health Minister Greg Hunt says there is a "high likelihood" COVID-19 will reach the Australian community
- Public health measures likely to increase if we see local community transmission

On Thursday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the rapid spread of virus outside of China had [prompted his Government to elevate Australia's response](#). "We believe the risk of global pandemic is very much upon us and as a result, as a government, we need to take the steps necessary to prepare for such a pandemic," Mr Morrison said. So, what does the emergency plan mean for you?



**How does the plan affect me?** At this stage, the activation of the Government's [emergency health response plan](#) doesn't change a whole lot for the general public.

## [What you need to know](#)

[Here's a rundown of all the facts about coronavirus, and how you can make sure you're protected.](#)

While the health sector is now working to adequately prepare for a potential COVID-19 outbreak, things are business as usual for the rest of us, health security expert Adam Kamradt-Scott said. "At the individual [level], nothing changes, principally because we don't have further cases at the local community level," said Dr Kamradt-Scott, an associate professor at the University of Sydney. So far, there has been no evidence of human-to-human transmission of the virus in Australia, with all of the people infected here having recently been in China or in contact with someone there.



"In Australia, the coronavirus has been effectively contained ... so even though the Government has enacted the emergency response plan, nothing substantially changes for the everyday person at the moment." Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt reinforced that message on Friday, after meeting with his state and territory counterparts at a special COAG pandemic meeting. "The message from today, from the states and territories, was go about your ordinary business," Mr Hunt said. "Go down to the Chinese restaurant, go out to the football or the Grand Prix or the netball."

Mr Hunt said although the global spread of coronavirus meant there was now a "high likelihood" COVID-19 would reach Australia at some point, there was no need for people to panic. "Our message is that we are prepared for that moment because we are not immune, but it is very important to go about your daily business," he said. [PM says Australia is well prepared for looming COVID-19 pandemic](#) (ABC News)

**When will things change?** Things will start to change if we see evidence of community transmission in Australia — whereby coronavirus cases emerge that have not come directly from overseas. "If people don't have a [relevant] travel history, and if they aren't a relative or friend of someone who has travelled from overseas, that would then indicate the virus has arrived in Australia and is spreading at the local community level," Dr Kamradt-Scott said. At that point, the circumstances around individual action, and the information the Government provides, will likely change.

"[The Government] will be encouraging people that have got potentially compromised immune systems to be more cautious," Dr Kamradt-Scott said. "We may also see aged care facilities start to enact tighter control measures for entry and exit of people." The general public will be encouraged to be [even more stringent in exercising personal hygiene practices](#) and avoiding close contact with people who are sick.

**What if things get worse?** The emergency response plan outlines responses to three levels of outbreak severity — low, moderate and high. Under the plan, a worst-case scenario outbreak would see:

- Large gatherings cancelled
- People having to work from home
- Mortuary services prioritised
- Aged care homes locked down
- Childcare centres closed



[COVID-19 is also affecting the health of global markets.](#) (Getty Images: Charly Triballeau)

Dr Kamradt-Scott said it wasn't guaranteed Australia would get to the point where the Government had to enact those measures. "The Australian economy has obviously already taken quite a substantive hit as a result of the travel ban from China," he said. "Those types of social distancing measures — the cancellation of mass gatherings and so forth — they will continue to have consequences on the economy.



"I would be surprised to see [such] widespread community measures ... based on the epidemiology of the virus that we have in front of us." [How is the world dealing with the coronavirus outbreak?](#)

[The Australian Government declares the country is "pandemic ready" as fresh coronavirus hotspots crop up across the globe, but how have other countries handled the outbreak of COVID19?](#)

In any case, Dr Kamradt-Scott said the public health response would be based on the transmissibility and severity of the virus once it reached Australia, and that it would be phased. "The first thing state health authorities will do as soon as they identify local community transmission is try and isolate people as much as possible, to try and reduce the spread of the virus," he said. "It will only be at the point where we start to see more people becoming unwell ... whereby it will be clear to health authorities that they can't contain it — that's when we would probably start to see more social distancing measures being implemented."

**What can I do now?** Earlier in the week, the ABC reported that experts say [now is the time to prepare, but not panic](#). University of Queensland virologist Ian Mackay suggested taking some simple measures in case there are interruptions to the supply chain. He's not suggesting we panic buy. But he said it's a good idea to ensure you have enough essential medication, especially for those with chronic health conditions, and to buy some extra essential non-perishable food supplies when you shop. Sharon Lewin, from Melbourne's Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, said it will be even more important for people to get a flu shot before the next flu season. That's because some people who have contracted the virus overseas have had co-infections, which worsened their conditions. What the experts are saying about coronavirus:

- [As a coronavirus pandemic looms, experts say now's the time to get ready](#)
- [The coronavirus emergency plan has been activated. Here's what that means for you](#)

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