

Freedom on the way + an update on the use of Novavax

New freedoms for fatigued Aucklanders at Alert Level 3.2

By Shazreen Hussain

After being stuck in step 1 of Alert Level 3 for weeks, Aucklanders are only moments away from new freedoms. The cabinet confirmed an in-principle decision to move Auckland to step 2 of level 3 from today Tuesday at 11.59 pm. So, what does this mean for Aucklanders? Some of the commonly asked questions are answered below.



Can I go to the gym under Alert Level 3.2? Outdoor fitness classes are still allowed but gyms remain closed in step 2. Classes like yoga and boot camp can now have a maximum of 25 people, (including instructors), with 2-metre physical distancing. Team sports such as rugby and football, cannot go ahead at this stage.

How about eating out? Whether it be a cappuccino or burrito, it will have to be taken away as hospitality sites such as cafes, bars, and restaurants cannot open until step 3.

Can I go shopping? Absolutely! In step 2 retail can open as long as customers keep a 2-metre distance, and staff and customers wear face coverings. At this stage, vaccination certificates are not part of the current Alert Levels, so will not apply once retailers reopen.

How about getting a haircut? Sorry, a professional haircut is not possible at step 2, but a home haircut is. Close contact businesses such as hairdressers and barbers will be able to open until the region transitions to step 3.

What does this mean for socialising outdoors? The good news is the number of people has increased from 10 to a maximum of 25 people. The two-household rule is no longer applicable so you can catch up with friends or family from as many households as you wish.

However, physical distancing is still highly recommended.

So, where else can I go? Well, your weekends in step 2 are somewhat exciting. More public facilities like museums, libraries, and zoos will be open. But please keep in mind face coverings and physical distancing of 2 metres are required.

What does this mean for the border? Auckland's border will remain in place at step 2 and will stay until the traffic light system is implemented.

Can schools reopen for all students? No, at present the reopening of schools is not involved in Auckland's three-step road map. However, Education Minister Chris Hipkins has said an "indicative" date for a "staged return" has been set for November 15 for students in Years 1-8. No date has been set for Year 9 and 10 students yet.

How about taking an overnight trip? While there are new freedoms, overnight stays at a batch, in an Airbnb, or even camping is still not allowed.



So, when, and how will restrictions ease in the future? At this stage, it's unclear when Auckland can move to Alert Level 3.3 - which is the least restrictive step - though it's likely to be at some time in November 2021.

This is because double-vaccination numbers continue to chug towards the 90 percent mark required to scrap the Alert Level system completely in favour of the traffic light system, which will see restrictions eased even more.

At Level 3.3, there will be even bigger changes - with hospitality venues and event facilities allowed to reopen with a limit of 50 people. Close contact businesses, like, barbers, hairdressers, and beauty salons will also be able to open their doors and social gatherings (both indoors and outdoors), can take place with a limit of 50 people in a defined space. Greater freedoms will be allowed when the 'red light' of the traffic

light system will follow the shift to Level 3.3 - though many of these freedoms will be limited to those who have been jabbed.

US manufacturer applies to Medsafe for provisional consent for Novavax

Biotechnology company Novavax has filed for provisional consent to use its Covid-19 vaccine in New Zealand. The application for use is now before drug safety regulator Medsafe. It is the first application related to a protein-based Covid-19 vaccine to reach Medsafe.

The step is just the first in a line of safety obstacles. Even if Novavax passes them all, the Cabinet will have the final say on whether the vaccine can be used or not. Novavax Chief Executive and President Stanley Erck said, "We remain laser-focused on delivering our vaccine, which is built on a proven, well-understood vaccine platform, and thank the Government of New Zealand for their ongoing partnership and confidence in our Covid-19 vaccine programme."

To date, Medsafe has granted provisional consent for the Pfizer, Janssen, and AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccines. The Government has not yet made final decisions to use the Janssen and AstraZeneca vaccines. The Novavax vaccine is similar to those used for diseases such as pertussis, hepatitis B, influenza, meningitis, and pneumococcal illness.

Dr. Ashley Bloomfield Director-General of Health said Novavax was not being used anywhere in the world until now. He told Newstalk ZB's Mike Hosking that from his understanding of their studies they still haven't quite completed their trials.

In September, Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said the Cabinet was expecting millions of vaccines purchased from Novavax in the first quarter of 2022. When asked if Novavax could be used for boosters, Dr. Bloomfield added that Pfizer was a good, effective vaccine, "so that's the direction we'll go".



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The Novavax submission includes clinical data from a pivotal phase 3 trial known as Prevent-19, which included 30,000 people in the United States and Mexico. Previously, a major phase 3 trial from the UK, involving 15,000 people, has been submitted to Medsafe. The vaccine demonstrated a “favourable safety and tolerability profile” in both trials the company said.

Novavax: What does the Ministry of Health say?



The health ministry says more information is required. Novavax said all the components needed for a regulatory assessment of its vaccine, including manufacturing, chemistry, and controls data, were now before Medsafe. The Ministry of Health, which includes Medsafe, said it was assessing data in a rolling application from Novavax that began in August, but it needs more data.

The Ministry said in a statement: “Medsafe has recently received a large amount of data from Novavax; however, there is more data and information yet to be provided.” “As with other Covid-19 vaccines, Medsafe will prioritise the review of this data. An announcement will be made once Medsafe has made a decision on the application.”

The statement said, following Medsafe’s regulatory decision, and once delivery schedules have been confirmed, the Ministry will consider using Novavax in New Zealand. Provisional consent means the pharmaceutical company must meet certain requirements, including supplying more information from its clinical trials around the world as they go on.

If Medsafe grants consent, officials will get more clinical and scientific guidance from the Covid-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group before the Government is requested to decide. Novavax has formally applied to use the vaccine in the UK, India, Indonesia, Canada, Australia, and the Philippines.

So, how does Novavax differ from Pfizer?

Well, just like Pfizer, the COVID-19 Novavax vaccine would be given in two doses. Also, like Pfizer, Novavax is not a live vaccine, which means it is appropriate for severely immunocompromised individuals.

But the protein-based Novavax vaccine (NVX-CoV2373) works slightly differently from the Pfizer vaccine, which uses mRNA technology. Pfizer’s COVID-19 jab teaches cells to make spike proteins, which are the surface projections on the virus. Once the immune system knows how to identify spike proteins, it can identify and fight COVID-19.

The Novavax vaccine comes readymade with spike proteins – multiple copies of them, formed into tiny particles. Protein-based vaccines are typically given alongside an adjuvant – a substance that enhances the immune system’s, creating higher levels of antibodies. In the case of Novavax, the adjuvant is called Matrix-M, based on a saponin – a compound that occurs naturally in plants and foods such as peanuts, asparagus, and garlic.

On another note... Does the 90 per cent vaccination target seem impossible?

Well, things are never going to be perfect, or even easy.

The New Zealand Government created a huge rod for its back by setting itself the 90 per cent Covid vaccination target. Ninety per cent of the entire nation seems feasible. But 90 per cent of all 20 district health boards (DHBs) are looking to be impractical – or at least a very long way off.



And yet this is the goal the Cabinet has said the country needs to reach before all regions go into the elaborate new traffic light system, with almost no lockdowns and freedom of movement across the nation.

Every weekday thus far has set a new record – for the lowest number of first jabs recorded since the wide roll-out began. Just 6659 people got the first jab on 3 November. And second doses are dropping too – averaging just 25,000 doses a day currently. If this rate was retained perfectly – with no further drop – the Northland wouldn’t hit 90 per cent double doses until January 20.

One of the challenges the Government will shortly face with this, is growing resentment from a large majority of the country that likely will pass or get very near the 90 per cent limit before the Christmas Holidays. Also, not all DHBs are equal in size, and it is some of the smallest DHBs that are mostly lagging behind.

So, what is the Government doing? The Government has given itself an exit clause. Ardern has promised “pragmatism” over the goal, with a check-in date on November 29 to see how things are progressing.



- Applications for the sixth COVID-19 Wage Subsidy August 2021, known as Wage Subsidy August 2021 #6, are open for two weeks between 9 am 29 October, and 11.59 pm, 11 November 2021.
- The seventh round of the Wage Subsidy will open next Friday.
- The first double payment of the Resurgence Support payment will also begin next Friday. As of 4 November 2021, the Government paid out \$1.75 billion, covering 471,566 applications.
- The Government has paid out \$5.3 billion through the Wage Subsidy and Economic Resurgence payment. About 993,733 Wage Subsidy applications have been approved with over \$9 billion being paid out.
- During the 1pm Cabinet update on 5 November 2021, the Government announced they have been looking at what they need to do for Aucklanders to be able to safely travel during Christmas and working through contingency plans as well.
- The Government has also committed \$120 million to lift Māori vaccination rates. Grant Robertson said the 90 per cent is a benchmark that they believe has equity inside it.

Resources

- Ministry of Health (www.health.govt.nz)
- Work and Income (www.workandincome.govt.nz)
- Inland Revenue (www.ird.govt.nz)
- Covid-19 Official Site (www.covid19.govt.nz)
- Stuff Official Site (www.stuff.co.nz)



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