

A high level task force, co-chaired by Member, NITI AAYOG and Principal Scientific Adviser, formed to enable COVID-19 related research and vaccine development : Health Ministry

5 research groups' COVID-19 vaccine development projects world-over have entered the stage of human trials: ICMR

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The number of COVID-19 positive cases stands at 15712 as on date, while 2231 people, that is, 14.19% people have recovered. A total of 507 people in the country have died because of the COVID-2019 infection; In the last 24 hours, 1334 new cases and 27 deaths have been reported. This was informed by the Joint Secretary, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Shri Luv Aggarwal, at the daily media briefing on the actions taken, preparedness and updates on COVID-19, held at National Media Centre, PIB New Delhi today. He further informed that 10 new districts have been added to the list of districts having no COVID-19 positive case in the last 14 days. These districts are Gaya and Saran in Bihar, Bareilly in U.P., Fatehgarh Sahib, Rupnagar in Punjab; Bhiwani, Hissar and Fatehabad in Haryana; and Kachar and Lakhimpur in Assam. This takes the number of districts with no positive cases for the last 2 weeks to 54, he further said.

The Joint Secretary also stated that a high level task force formed today, for COVID-19 related works in the fields of science and vaccine development. It is co-chaired by Member, Niti Aayog and Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India. AYUSH, ICMR, Department of Science and Technology (DST), Department of Biotechnology (DBT), CSIR, DRDO, DG-Health Services and Drug Controller General of India are also members of the task force.

- The aim of this task force is to enable COVID-19 related research by academia, industry and international community.
- The Task Force has made DBT a central coordinating authority for vaccine development and their main work will be to identify a pathway for vaccine development. For this work, a dynamic list of national and international organisations working for vaccine development is to be made, their progress is to be monitored and facilitation at government level is to be done by them.
- This apart, clinical cohorts will be focussing on long term follow-up of people for better understanding of the disease and its management will be worked upon.
- Also, bio-specimens will be collected which will form the basis for further trials of drugs and vaccines. It will be different from sample testing protocol.

Informing that, as stated by the Prime Minister, some relaxations in lockdown measures will be given from 00 hrs of April 20, 2020 in non-hotspot areas, the Joint Secretary further said:

- Containment zones in hotspot areas will not have these relaxations.
- States and UTs can impose stricter measures than the guidelines for lockdown given by Government of India.

- According to Health Ministry guidelines, Hotspots or red zones are those areas where large number of COVID-19 cases have been found or the places where doubling time of COVID-19 cases is less than 4 days. No relaxations are permitted in the containment zones of these hotspots. Strict parameters are to be followed and nothing other than essential services will be allowed in these areas.
- States and districts to ensure that lockdown norms are followed in places where relaxations will be allowed. SOPs related to social distancing must be adhered to in offices, workplaces and establishments in those areas.
- Certain activities are to remain prohibited even in relaxation areas till May 3, 2020. These activities are passenger traffic movement by rail, air, road, excepting where exemption is given.
- Educational institutes, industry and commercial activities and hospitality services will also remain prohibited, unless exempted.
- Cinema halls, malls, shopping complexes, entertainment parks etc also to remain closed.
- Social, political, religious, cultural, entertainment or academic and sports gatherings are prohibited. Religious places and religious congregations should also remain prohibited.
- Taxis including auto-rickshaws, cycle rickshaws and cab aggregators also fall in prohibited category.
- Some activities have been given relaxations in the interest of agriculture and related activities, rural economy, daily wage earners, health services and functioning of supply chain of essential goods.

Shri Aggarwal further cautioned that the criterion for demarcating red and other zones is a rolling one, and if cases are reported in non-hotspots, then it can be converted into containment area. He called for cooperation in maintaining lockdown measures so that normalcy can soon be restored. Remarking that the efforts are directed at restoring normalcy slowly so that both 'Jaan' and 'Jahaan' remains, he said, a challenge in the containment plan related to COVID-19 is not to commit any mistake while restoring the services.

There are 755 Dedicated COVID hospitals and 1389 Dedicated Health Care Centres in the country as of now, the Joint Secretary further informed.

The Joint Secretary made a presentation of Victoria Hospital in Karnataka which has been successfully turned into a dedicated COVID-19 Hospital by using the Emergency and Trauma Centre. The hospital started functioning with a sensitization programme about PPEs, monitoring of COVID-19 patients etc for health care workers. A control room has been created in the affiliated college of the hospital.

Joint Secretary, MHA stated that:

- Home Minister held a meeting with officials, where he said that our battle with COVID-19 continues to be on, so lockdown and other guidelines need to be followed diligently. Home Minister has also said that areas which do not fall under hotspots, clusters and containment zones, where relaxations to lockdown have been given, also need to be on alert. The sectors which do not fall under hotspots, cluster and containment zones, and where a number of relaxations have been given, need to be careful and it is necessary to ensure that these relaxations are given on basis of proper assessment of the practical situation.
- Home Ministry has issued a SOP for movement of stranded labourers in their home states for taking part in permissible economic activities in an orderly manner. But it should be done by strongly adhering to the social distancing norms. States and UTs have been asked to implement it.
- A number of economic activities have been allowed in rural sectors for which district administration, in coordination with industries, will have to make arrangements for transportation of labourers to their workplaces. Apart from giving a push to economic activities, this will also provide employment to labourers.
- Since additional new activities, outside the containment zones, have been permitted in the consolidated revised guidelines with effect from 20th April 2020, these workers could be engaged in industrial, manufacturing, construction, farming and MNREGA works. This move will provide employment to the labourers.
- Similarly, managers and in-charges of large enterprises should also take care of them; especially managers of large industrial units should make arrangements so that labourers can stay within the industrial units.

- This apart, measures should be taken to ensure required facilities and meals are given to stranded labourers.
- States should provide necessary security to medical teams undertaking community testing. While going for health inspections, community leaders may be engaged for smooth running of work. This way, assistance may be sought from community leaders also for testing and treatment as well as creating awareness about COVID-19, so as to dispel the myths and wrong notions about it.

A total of 3,86,791 COVID-19 tests have been done till yesterday, informed the representative of ICMR. Out of these, 37,173 tests were performed yesterday itself, which includes 29,287 tests in ICMR network labs and 7886 tests done in private labs. There are 194 labs in ICMR network and 82 private labs for COVID-19 testing as on date.

In reply to a media query, Dr Gangakhedkar of ICMR further stated, 5 research groups' COVID-19 vaccine development projects worldwide have entered the stage of human trials.

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