

The Optimise Study: A rapid survey examining the influence of potential cessation of the Victorian pandemic declaration

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BACKGROUND

In March 2020, the Victorian Government declared a State of Emergency to combat COVID-19 and help to provide the Chief Health Officer with the powers needed to manage the pandemic. The State of Emergency framework was designed to respond to serious but short-term events. In December 2021, the State of Emergency ended and was replaced by the pandemic management framework. This legislation is specifically designed to assist in the prevention and management of public health risks posed by a pandemic. Effective 15 December 2021, a pandemic declaration by the Premier gave the Victorian Minister for Health the authority to make pandemic orders to protect public health for Victoria and combat COVID-19.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been various government-issued pandemic orders, including requirements to wear a face mask and requirements that people who have COVID-19 and their close contacts stay at home. Unless extended, the Pandemic Declaration that is currently in place is due to expire at 11.59 pm 12 July 2022. If this were to happen, the Minister for Health would no longer have authority to issue pandemic orders.

The Optimise Study has followed a cohort of around 700 Victorians since September 2020. A rapid survey was conducted between 27 May and 6 June 2022 to assess Optimise participants' behaviours under the current pandemic declaration and their potential behaviours should the Victorian pandemic declaration cease and public health orders no longer be in place.

Of the 668 participants invited to complete the survey, 516 (77%) responded. The participants who completed the survey were representative of the Optimise survey cohort. Fifteen participants completed phone-administered surveys with bilingual data collectors in Mandarin, Arabic, and Dinka.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Nearly one-third (32%, n=166) of participants reported having tested positive for COVID-19 at least once since the beginning of the pandemic. Half (50%, n=83) of these participants reported having tested positive in the last three months*.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC DECLARATION

- Whilst most respondents indicated that they would follow the current COVID-19 requirements and recommendations if they tested positive even if the pandemic declaration ceased, there was a notable **reduction** in the proportion of participants indicating they would adhere to some measures.
- Eighty-five percent of participants reported that they would be "very likely" to **isolate for seven days** if they tested positive under the current pandemic declaration, as opposed to 65% of participants if the declaration were no longer in place.
- 95% vs. 87% of participants said they would stay home for seven days from testing positive regardless of symptoms under the pandemic declaration compared to no declaration.

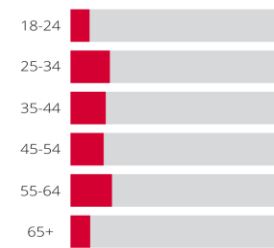
* This proportion is likely to be an underestimate of past COVID-19 infection, based on our previous reports of under testing in [Optimise report 15](#) and [the Summer Snapshot report](#).

- 98% vs 95% were "likely" or "very likely" to inform their household-like contacts of their positive result under the pandemic declaration compared to without the pandemic declaration, and 96% vs. 92% were "likely" or "very likely" to notify their employer or education facility of their positive test result.
- If the pandemic declaration ceased, there were significant change in the proportions of participants indicating they would be "likely" or "very likely" to: stay home only for the days that they had symptoms (37% under the pandemic declaration vs. 56% if the pandemic declaration ceased) if they tested positive. Also the proportion who would leave home to shop for groceries and supplies increased (17% vs. 26%).
- Most participants reported that they would follow the current COVID-19 requirements and recommendations if they were household/household-like contacts even if the pandemic declaration ceased and there were no requirements (but recommendations were in place). However, there were significant reductions in the proportion of participants reporting they would be "likely" or "very likely" to: stay home on any days they had symptoms (89% under the current pandemic declaration vs. 79% if the pandemic declaration ceased), continue to follow the current requirements and use a RAT for at least five of the seven days from their exposure (87% vs. 73%).
- Two-thirds (67%) of participants reported that they would be "very likely" to stay home on any days they had COVID-19-like symptoms if they were a household/household-like contact under the current pandemic declaration. This fell to 55% if the pandemic declaration were no longer in place.
- If they were household/household-like contacts, the proportion of participants indicating they would be "likely" or "very likely" to use a RAT only if they developed symptoms increased from 48% under the current arrangements to 56% if the pandemic declaration ceased.
- If the pandemic declaration were to cease, participants who had never tested positive reported that they would be more likely to stay home if they were a household/household-like contact than those who had previously tested positive (62% vs. 50%).

ACCEPTABILITY OF COVID-19 PREVENTION MEASURES

- Participants indicated their acceptance of COVID-19 prevention measures that are currently in place.
- Eighty-eight percent (454/514) "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable to **require** all people who test positive for COVID-19 to isolate for seven days after they tested positive, as is currently required.
- Three quarters (75%, 382/508) of participants "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable to **require** household/household-like contacts to follow COVID-19 requirements and recommendations if they leave home in the seven days after being notified that they are a household/household-like contact.
- The majority of participants "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable for people to continue isolating for seven days if they test positive for COVID-19, especially if there was a consistently high number of hospitalisations with COVID-19 (91%, 467/511) and over 20,000 cases per day (89%, 455/510) in Victoria.
- Participants showed a preference for requirements over recommendations on isolation and quarantine for people who test positive to COVID-19 and their household/household-like contacts.

1. DEMOGRAPHICS



28% are aged between **18-34**



79% live in **metropolitan Melbourne**



14% speak a **language other than English** at home



32% have **tested positive** for COVID-19



98% have received **two or more doses of the COVID-19 vaccine**



22% are **healthcare workers**

Of the 166 (32%) participants who had ever tested positive to COVID-19, 50% (n=83) were infected in the last three months, 40% (n=66) were infected three to six months ago, 5% (n=8) were infected seven to 12 months ago and 2% (n=4) were infected over 12 months ago. Half (50%, 259/516) of participants indicated that they were currently required to attend their workplace in person, while 23% (n=119) reported that they did not have to attend their workplace (i.e., could work from home). Twenty-six percent (n=135) were not employed at the time of the survey.

2. BEHAVIOURS OF PARTICIPANTS WHO TEST POSITIVE

We asked participants about their behaviours if they tested positive to COVID-19 under the current pandemic declaration, and what they would do if they tested positive and the declaration were no longer in place. Overall, most participants reported that they would be likely to follow the current COVID-19 prevention measures if they tested positive for COVID-19. However, there were some differences, where a lower proportion of participants would partake in COVID-19 prevention measures if the pandemic declaration ceased. For example, a chi-squared significance test found a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between the proportion of participants reporting that they would be "likely" or "very likely" to stay at home for seven days after testing positive regardless of symptoms under the current pandemic declaration (95%) and if the declaration were to cease (87%) (see Figure 1).

How likely would you be to stay home for 7 days from testing positive regardless of symptoms under the current pandemic declaration vs if the pandemic declaration were to cease if you tested positive to COVID-19?

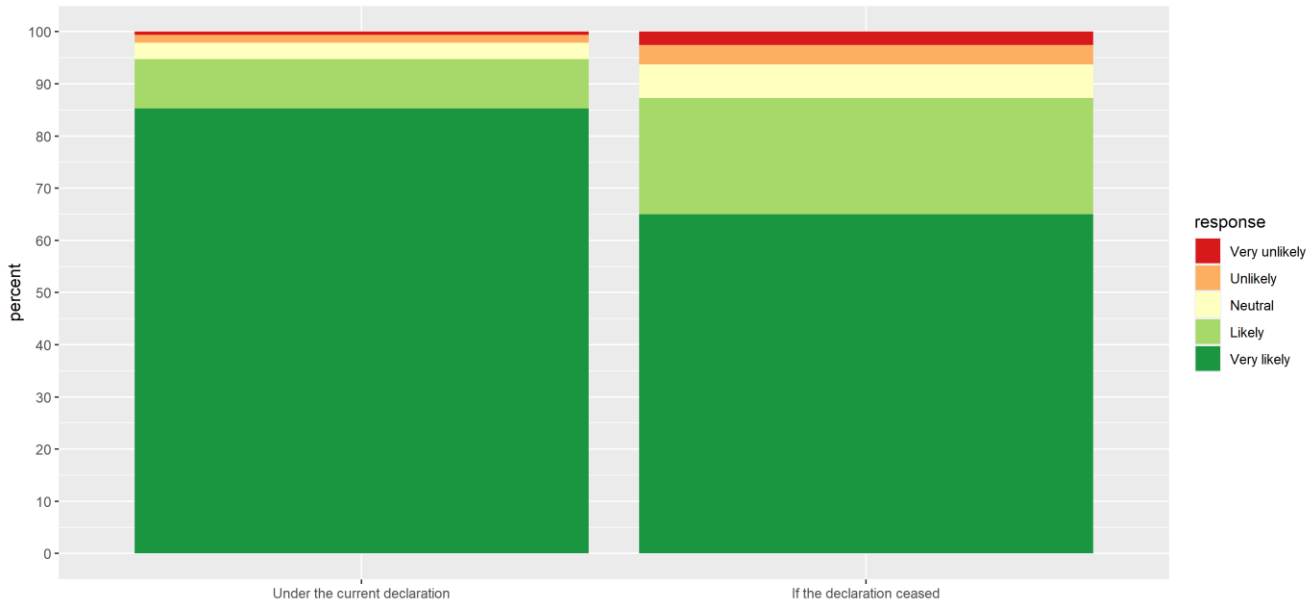


Figure 1: Likelihood of participants to stay home for seven days regardless of symptoms if they were to test positive to COVID-19 under the current pandemic declaration, and if the declaration were no longer in place.

Under the current pandemic declaration, 37% of participants would be "very likely" or "likely" to stay home **only** on days when they had symptoms if they tested positive to COVID-19. If the declaration were to cease, 56% would be "very likely" or "likely" to do so (see Figure 2). A chi-squared significance test found a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) between these two proportions.

How likely would you be to stay home only for the days that you had symptoms related to your COVID-19 infection under the current pandemic declaration vs if the pandemic declaration were to cease if you tested positive to COVID-19?

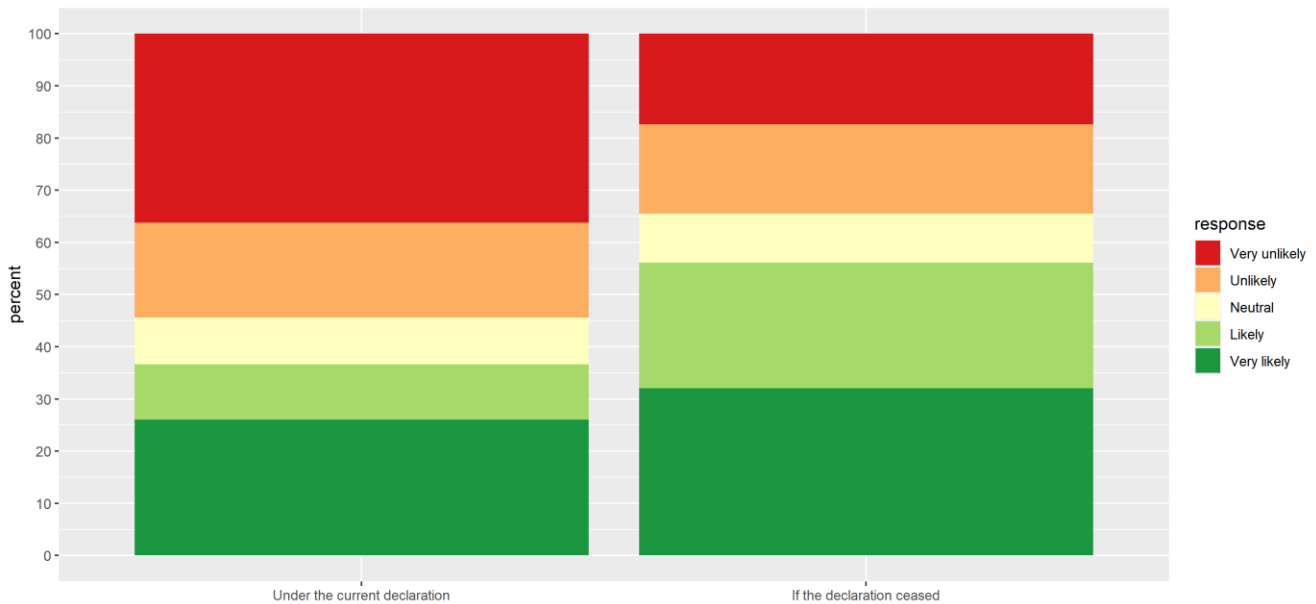


Figure 2 Likelihood of participants to stay home only on days where they experienced symptoms if they were to test positive under the current pandemic declaration, and if the declaration were no longer in place.

For participants who indicated a response other than "very likely" to the question of whether they would stay home for seven days after testing positive to COVID-19 regardless of symptoms, we looked at their expected behaviour if they were to leave home (see Figure 3). Under the current declaration, if they tested positive and left home, 47% (35/74) would be "very likely" to wear a face mask indoors, compared to 45% (78/174) who would be "very likely" to do so if the declaration were no longer in place. If they tested positive to COVID-19 and left home under the current pandemic declaration, 50% (37/74) would be "very likely" to avoid sensitive settings

such as hospitals and aged care facilities and a 60% (107/178) would be "very likely" to avoid sensitive settings if the declaration were to cease. Participants would also be more likely to avoid visiting older people or those at risk of severe COVID-19 if the pandemic declaration were to end; 53% (39/73) would be "very likely" to avoid seeing people who are at risk of severe COVID-19 if they tested positive and left home under the current declaration, compared to 61% (108/177) if the declaration were to cease.

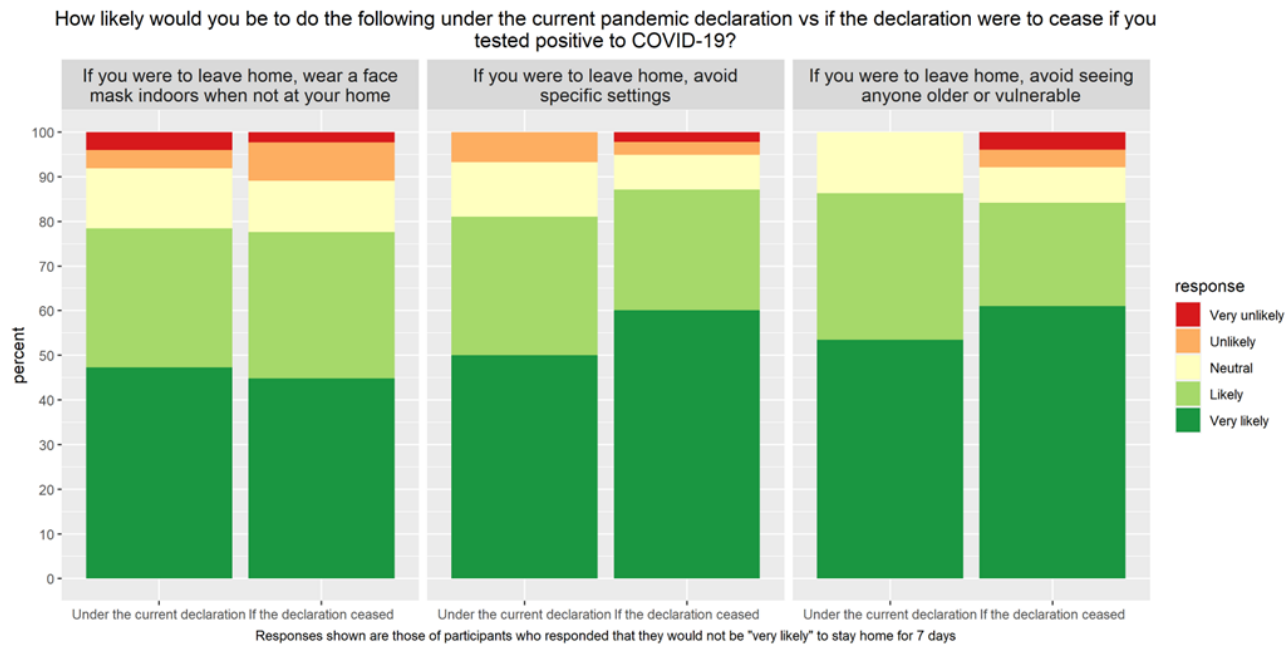


Figure 3 For participants who indicated they would not be "very likely" to stay home for seven days if they tested positive, proportion who would participate in prevention measures if they tested positive for COVID-19 and left home (under the current pandemic declaration and if the declaration were no longer in place).

Table 1 below shows participants' potential behaviours if they tested positive under the current pandemic declaration and if the declaration were to cease. If the declaration were to be removed, there would be **significant decreases** in the proportions of participants who would be "likely" or "very likely" to: stay home for seven days from testing positive regardless of symptoms (95% vs. 87%, $p < 0.001$), inform their household/household-like contacts (98% vs. 95%, $p = 0.003$) and notify their employer or education facility of their positive test result (96% vs. 92%, $p = 0.048$). There were **significant increases** in the proportions of participants who would be likely or very likely to: stay home only for the days that they had symptoms (37% vs. 56%, $p < 0.001$) and leave home to shop for groceries (17% vs. 26%, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1 Percentage of participants who responded "likely" or "very likely" about their potential behaviour if they tested positive for COVID-19

Potential behaviours if tested positive	Under current declaration	If declaration ceases	p-value
Inform your household-like contacts of your positive result	98%	95%	0.003
Notify your employer or education facility of your positive test result	96%	92%	0.048
Stay home for 7 days from testing positive regardless of symptoms	95%	87%	<0.001
*If you were to leave home, avoid seeing anyone older or vulnerable	86%	84%	0.010
*If you were to leave home, avoid specific settings	81%	87%	0.400
*If you were to leave home, wear a face mask indoors when not at your home	78%	78%	0.700
Attend your workplace only if you no longer had symptoms	55%	57%	0.500
Stay home only for the days that you had symptoms	37%	56%	<0.001
Leave home to shop for groceries and supplies	17%	26%	<0.001
Attend your workplace even if you still had symptoms	9%	13%	0.200
Visit your family and friends as normal	6%	8%	0.100
Take public transport	6%	7%	0.088
Attend large gatherings and events as normal	5%	7%	0.200

*Responses shown are of participants who did not report that they would be "very likely" to stay home for seven days, as in figure 3.

3. BEHAVIOURS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE HOUSEHOLD/HOUSEHOLD-LIKE CONTACTS

Participants were asked to indicate their potential behaviours in the seven days after exposure if they were identified as a COVID-19 household/household-like contact under the current pandemic declaration, and if they were identified as a household/household-like contact and the declaration was no longer in place. Most participants reported that they would be "likely" or "very likely" to follow the current COVID-19 prevention requirements under the current declaration, but fewer would do so if the declaration were no longer in place (see Table 2).

How likely would you be to stay home for 7 days from exposure to a positive COVID-19 case under the current pandemic declaration vs if the pandemic declaration were to cease if you were a close contact?

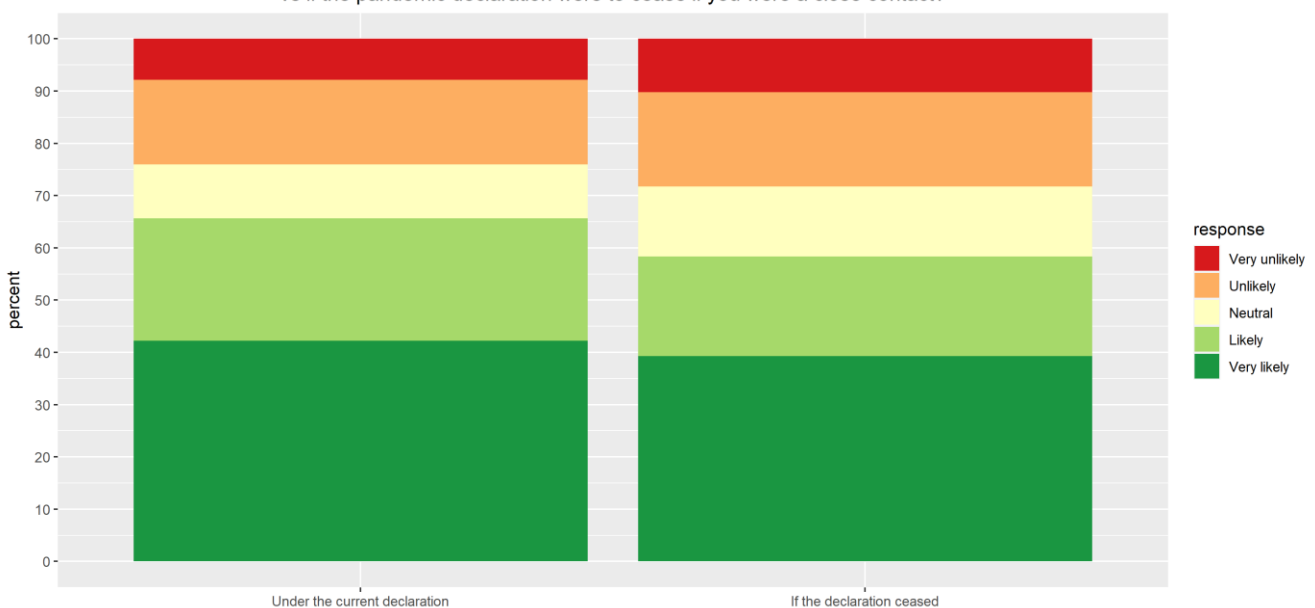


Figure 3 Likelihood of participants to stay home for seven days if they were a household/household-like contact under the current pandemic declaration and if the declaration were no longer in place.

If they were identified as a household/household-like contact, participants would be more likely to stay home for seven days post exposure under the current declaration (23% "likely" and 42% "very likely") than if the declaration ceased (19% "likely" and 39% "very likely"). This difference was not significant after conducting a chi-squared test ($p=0.053$) (see Figure 4).

How likely would you be to stay home on any days you had symptoms potentially related to COVID-19 under the current pandemic declaration vs if the pandemic declaration were to cease if you were a close contact?

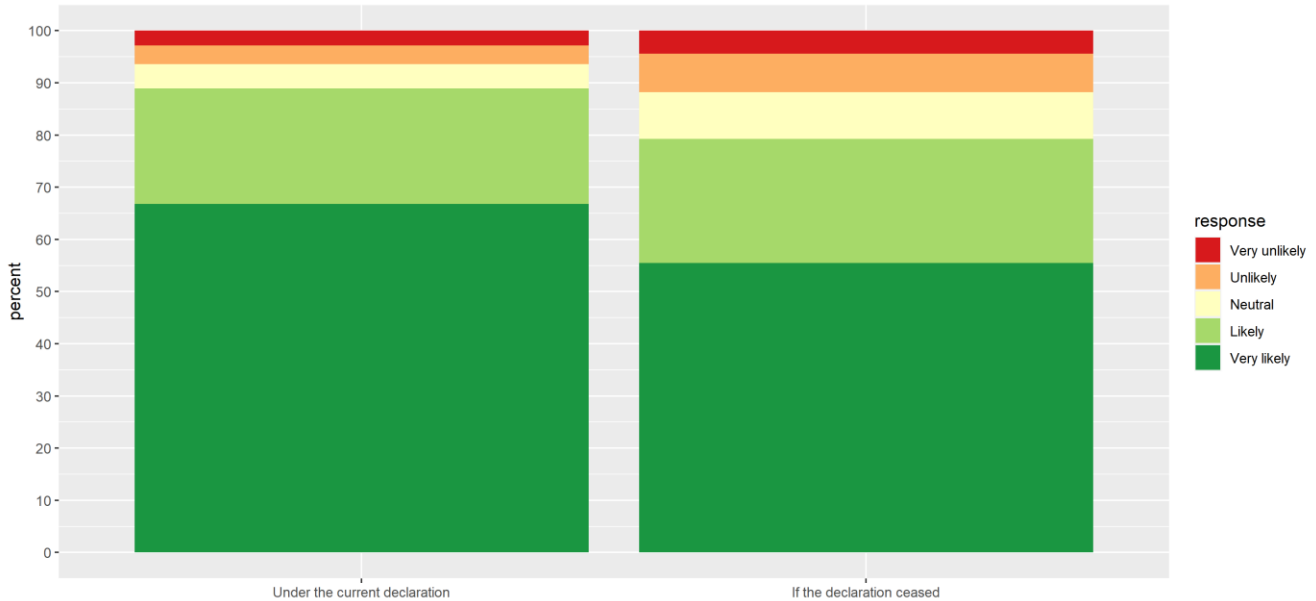


Figure 4 Likelihood of participants to stay home **only** on days where they experienced symptoms if they were a household/household-like contact under the current pandemic declaration, and if the declaration were no longer in place.

Under the current pandemic declaration, 66% of participants would be "very likely" to stay home on any days when they had symptoms related to COVID-19 if they were a household/household-like contact while if the declaration were to cease, 55% would be "very likely" to do so (see Figure 5). A chi-squared significance test found that participants would be significantly more likely ($p<0.001$) to stay home only when they had symptoms as a household/household-like contact under the current declaration (89% "likely" or "very likely") than if there were no pandemic declaration in place (79% "likely" or "very likely").

How likely would you be to do the following under the current pandemic declaration vs if the declaration were to cease if you were a close contact?

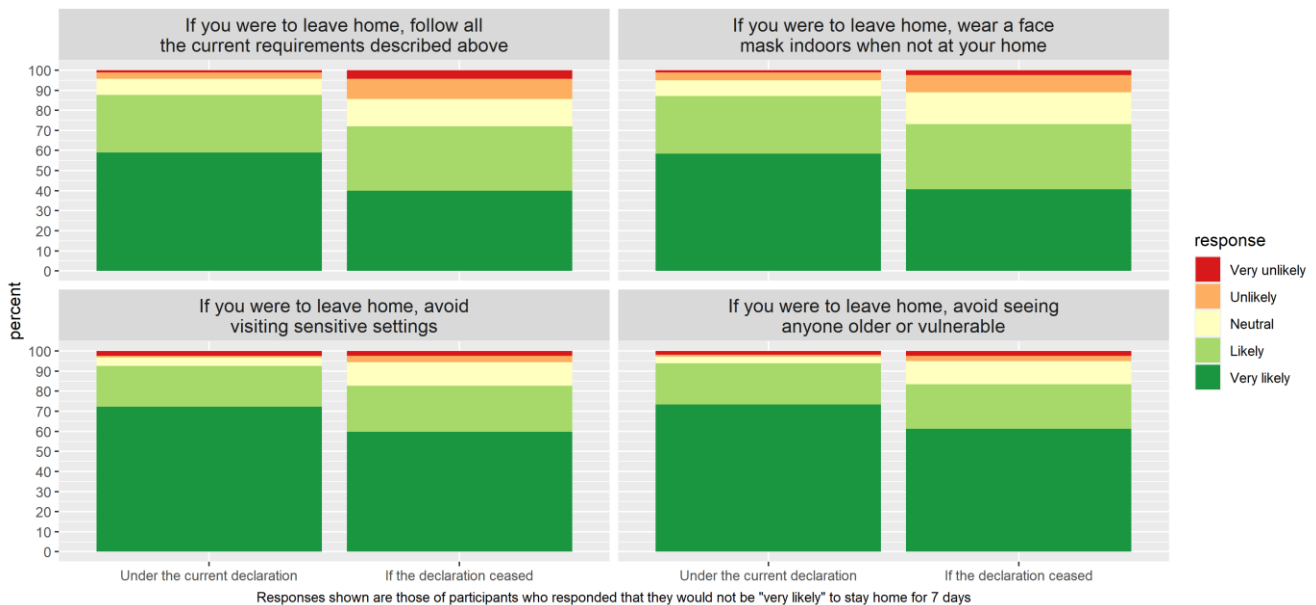


Figure 5 Likelihood of participants who would not be "very likely" to stay home for seven days, to participate in prevention measures if they were a household/household-like contact and left home under the current pandemic declaration, and if the declaration were no longer in place.

For those participants who indicated a response other than "very likely" to the question of whether they would stay home for seven days from exposure to a positive COVID-19 case, we looked at their expected behaviour if they were to leave home (see Figure 6). If the pandemic declaration were no longer in place, there were decreased proportions of responses indicating "very likely" to: follow all the current rules for household/household-like contacts such as testing on a RAT for five out of seven days (59% [167/283] under the pandemic declaration vs. 40% [120/301] if the declaration ceased); wear a face mask indoors (58% [164/281] vs. 41% [121/298]); avoid sensitive settings such as hospitals and aged care homes (72% [205/284] vs. 60% [180/301]) and to avoid seeing anyone older or are at risk of severe COVID-19 (73% [206/281] vs. 61% [182/297]).

For the four potential behaviours shown in Figure 6, a chi-squared test found a **significant decrease** ($p \leq 0.001$) in the proportion of people who would be "likely" or "very likely" to partake in each of the potential behaviours if the pandemic orders were no longer in place (see Table 2). If the declaration were to be removed, there would be significant decreases in the proportions of participants who would be "likely" or "very likely" to: avoid seeing anyone older or at risk of severe COVID-19 (94% vs. 84%, $p < 0.001$), avoid visiting sensitive settings such as hospitals and aged-care facilities (93% vs. 83%, $p = 0.001$), follow all the current requirements for household/household-like contacts (88% vs. 72%, $p < 0.001$), wear a face mask indoors when not at home (87% vs. 73%, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2 Percentage of participants who responded "likely" or "very likely" to potential behaviours if they were a household or household-like contact

Potential behaviours if they were a household contact	Under current declaration	If declaration ceases	p-value
*If you were to leave home, avoid seeing anyone older or vulnerable	94%	84%	<0.001
*If you were to leave home, avoid visiting sensitive settings	93%	83%	0.001
Stay home on any days you had symptoms	89%	79%	<0.001
*If you were to leave home, follow all the current requirements	88%	72%	<0.001
Notify your employer or education facility you were a close contact	88%	82%	0.093
*If you were to leave home, wear a face mask indoors when not at your home	87%	73%	<0.001
Continue to follow the current requirements and use a RAT for at least 5 of the 7 days from your exposure	87%	73%	<0.001
Stay home for 7 days from exposure to a positive COVID-19 case	66%	58%	0.053
Attend your workplace only if you did not have symptoms	59%	55%	0.600
Use a RAT only if you developed symptoms	48%	56%	0.004
Leave home to shop for groceries and supplies	43%	41%	0.500
Leave home if you had symptoms but tested negative on a RAT	35%	38%	0.500
Attend your workplace even if you had symptoms	14%	16%	0.074
Visit your family and friends as normal	13%	13%	>0.900
Take public transport	11%	11%	0.700
Attend large gatherings and events as normal	11%	11%	0.600

*Responses shown are of participants who responded anything other than "very likely" to the question about whether they would stay home for seven days, as in figure 6.

4. ACCEPTABILITY OF COVID-19 PREVENTION MEASURES

We examined the acceptability of proposed COVID-19 prevention measures for people who test positive and/or have been identified as household/household-like contacts. Participants found COVID-19 **requirements** to be more acceptable than **recommendations** for people who test positive and/or household/household-like contacts (see figure 7).

Ninety-one percent (463/510) of participants "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable to **require** health and aged-care workers who test positive not to attend work for the seven days after they receive their positive result. Eighty-eight percent (454/514) "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable to **require** all people who test positive for COVID-19 to isolate for seven days after testing positive, as is currently in place, while only 47% (242/513) "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable to **only recommend** that all people who test positive isolate for seven days.

Three quarters (75%, 382/508) of participants "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable to **require** household/household-like contacts to comply with COVID-19 advice (i.e., testing, wearing masks) if they leave home in the seven days after exposure. In comparison, fewer participants (52%, 262/507) "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that it would be acceptable to **only recommend** that household/household-like contacts leave their home in the seven days post exposure to COVID-19 if they follow COVID-19 prevention advice.

Over half of participants (56%, 280/503) "somewhat disagreed" or "totally disagreed" that it would be acceptable for different workplaces or education providers to decide whether they allow people who test positive to COVID-19 to attend the workplace/education place. More than three-quarters (80%, 404/508) of participants "somewhat disagreed" or "totally disagreed" that it would be acceptable to provide **no** advice to people who are household or household-like contacts and let them make their own choices about quarantine and testing.

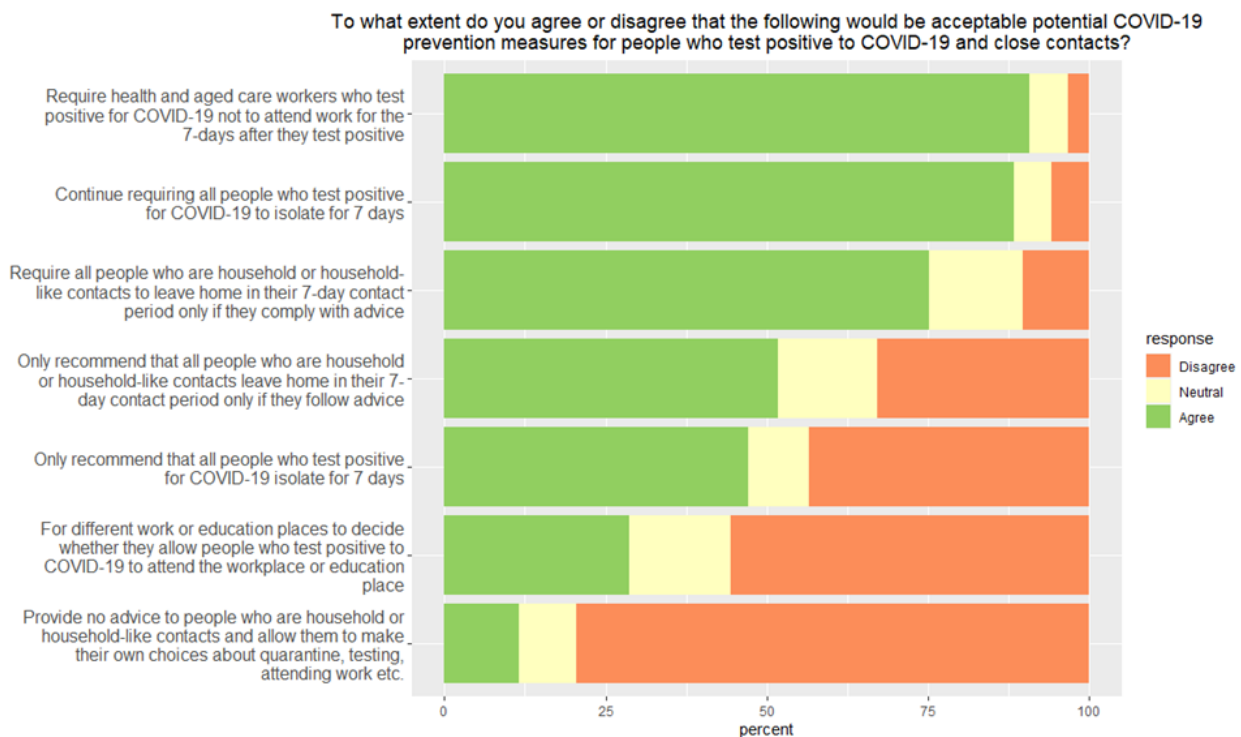


Figure 7 Acceptability of potential COVID-19 prevention measures for people who test positive and household contacts (n=514)

5. ACCEPTABILITY OF ISOLATION AND QUARANTINE

We explored participants' attitudes towards potential COVID-19 prevention measures – isolation and quarantine as a response to COVID-19 infections in the Victorian community and hospitalisations. Most participants agreed that isolation and quarantine should be required for people who test positive for COVID-19 and people who are household/household-like contacts (see Figure 8).

Ninety-one percent (467/511) of participants "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that people who test positive to COVID-19 should be required to isolate for at least seven days if hospital admissions consistently increase in Victoria. Eighty-nine percent (455/510) of participants "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that people who test positive for COVID-19 should be required to isolate for at least seven days if COVID-19 cases in Victoria are consistently greater than 20,000 per day.

Fifty-four percent (54%, 279/512) of participants "somewhat disagreed" or "totally disagreed" that there should only be recommendations (but not requirements) on isolation for people who test positive for COVID-19, regardless of case or hospitalisation numbers. A slightly lower proportion (51%, 260/510) of participants "somewhat disagreed" or "totally disagreed" that regardless of cases or hospitalisation numbers, there should only be recommendations (but not requirements) for people who are household/household-like contacts. This indicates that amongst our cohort, participants are largely accepting of some level of requirement on people's behaviour when they test positive or are identified as a household/household-like contact.

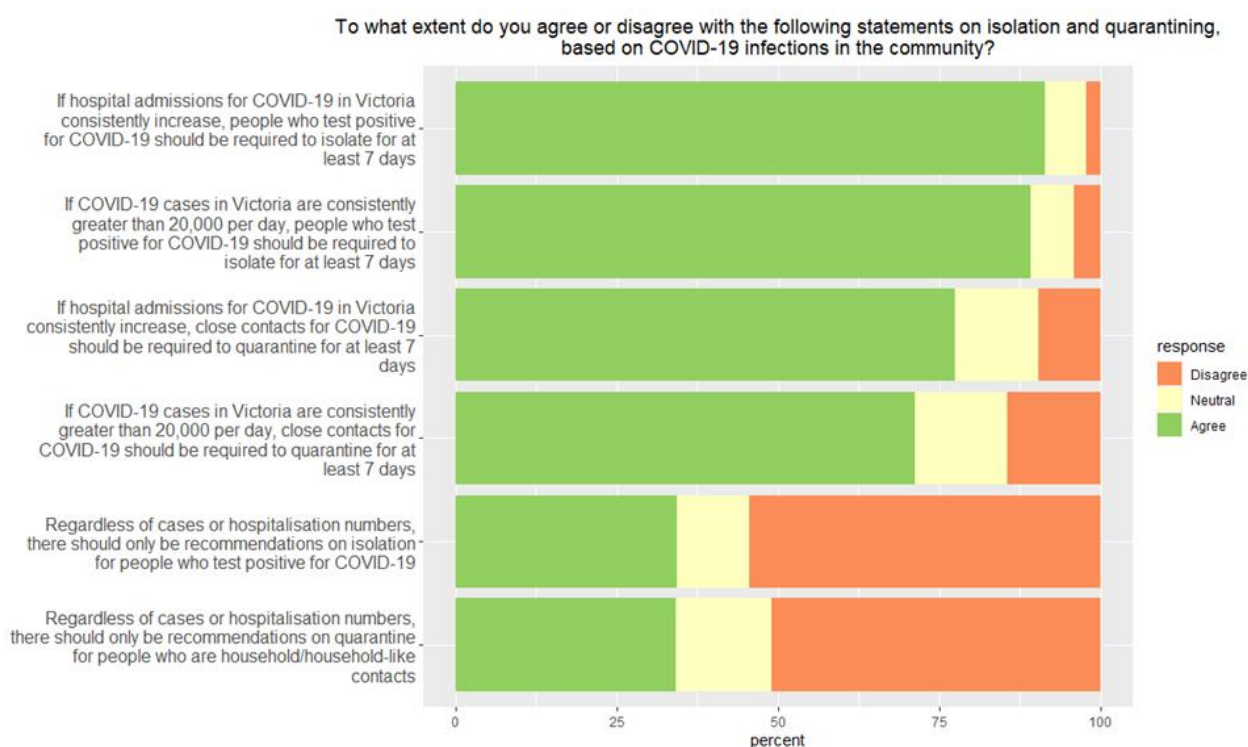


Figure 8 Acceptability of isolation and quarantine based on COVID-19 infections

Compared to participants who were able to work from home, participants who had to attend their workplace in person were less accepting of requirements on isolation and quarantine for people who test positive and household/household-like contacts (see Figure 9).

Seventy-nine percent (92/116) of participants who could work from home "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that if case numbers in Victoria were greater than 20,000 per day, close contacts should be required to quarantine for seven days, as opposed to 63% (161/256) of people who had to attend their workplace in person.

Similarly, if COVID-19 hospital admissions in Victoria consistently increased, 84% (97/116) of participants who were able to work from home "somewhat agreed" or "totally agreed" that household/household-like contacts should quarantine for at least seven days after exposure to a positive COVID-19 case, as opposed to 72% (186/257) of participants who had to attend their workplace in person. Participants who were required to attend their workplace in person were also more likely to agree that regardless of case numbers or hospitalisations, there should only be recommendations (not requirements) on isolation for people who test positive for COVID-19 compared to people who were able to work from home (37% [94/256] vs. 26% [31/118]).

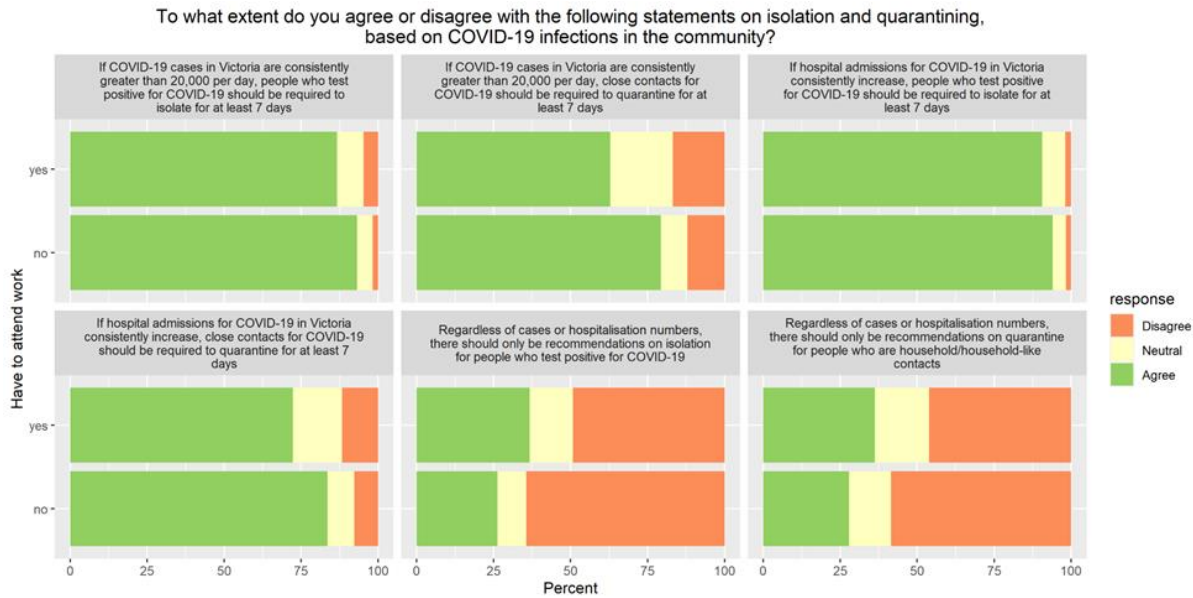


Figure 9 Comparison of acceptability of isolation and quarantine based on COVID-19 infections between participants who had to attend workplace in person and those who did not have to attend

Participants who spoke a language other than English at home were more likely to "somewhat agree" or "totally agree" that there should **only be recommendations** on isolation for people who test positive for COVID-19 regardless of case numbers or hospitalisations (57%, 41/72) compared to people who spoke English at home (31%, 134/438) (see Figure 10).

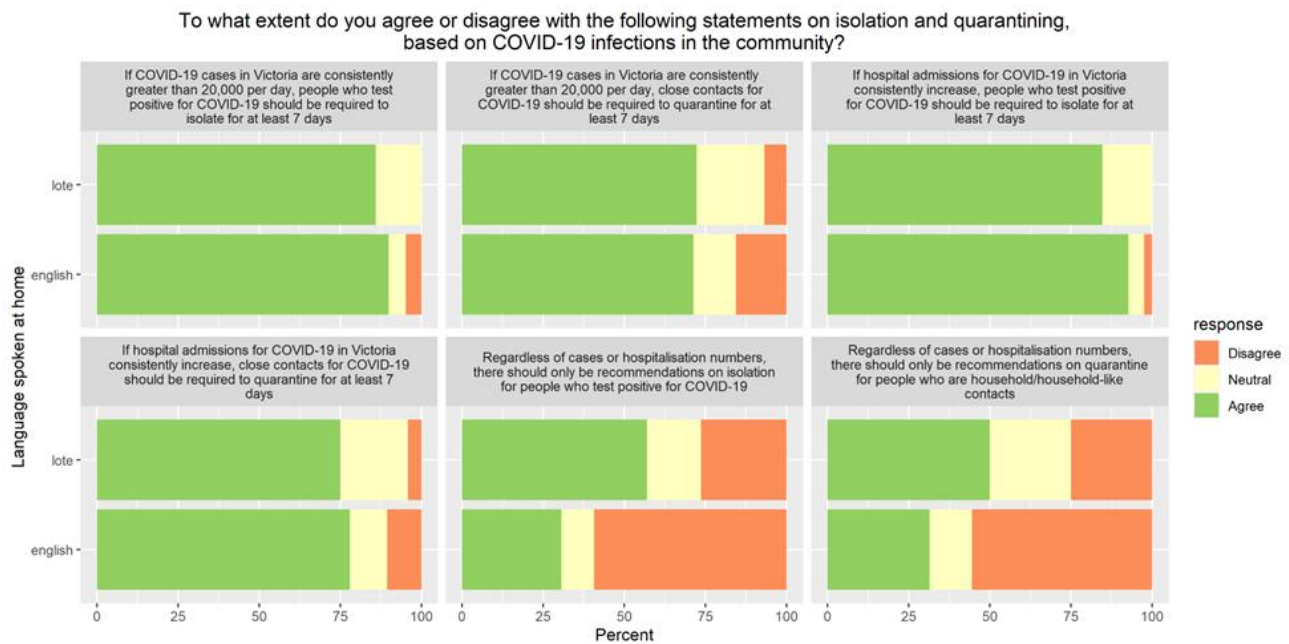


Figure 10 Comparison of acceptability of isolation and quarantine based on COVID-19 infections between participants who spoke English at home and those who spoke non-English at home

6. POTENTIAL BEHAVIOUR BY AGE AND PAST COVID-19 INFECTION

We compared the differences in perceived COVID-19 prevention behaviours reported among participants in different age groups under the condition: if they are a household/household-like contact and under the current pandemic declaration. Across all age groups, most participants (78–92%) reported that they would be likely to continue to follow the current requirements and use a RAT for at least five of the seven days from their exposure to a positive COVID-19 case (see Figure 11).

Participants aged 18–44 years were slightly more likely to report that they would attend their workplace in person if they were a household/household-like contact regardless of whether they had symptoms (15–29%) compared to those aged 45 and over (4–10%). Participants aged 18–44 years also reported that they would be more likely to visit family and friends as normal (15–20% vs. 7–11%) and take public transport (13–20% vs. 4–9%) compared to participants aged 45 and over.

A considerably smaller proportion of participants aged 18–24 (38%, 17/45) than those aged 25 and over (57–95%) reported that they would be likely to stay home for seven days from exposure to a positive COVID-19 case. Participants aged 18–24 years were also less likely to indicate that they would only use a RAT if they developed symptoms compared to participants who were 25 and older (35% and 45–52% respectively).

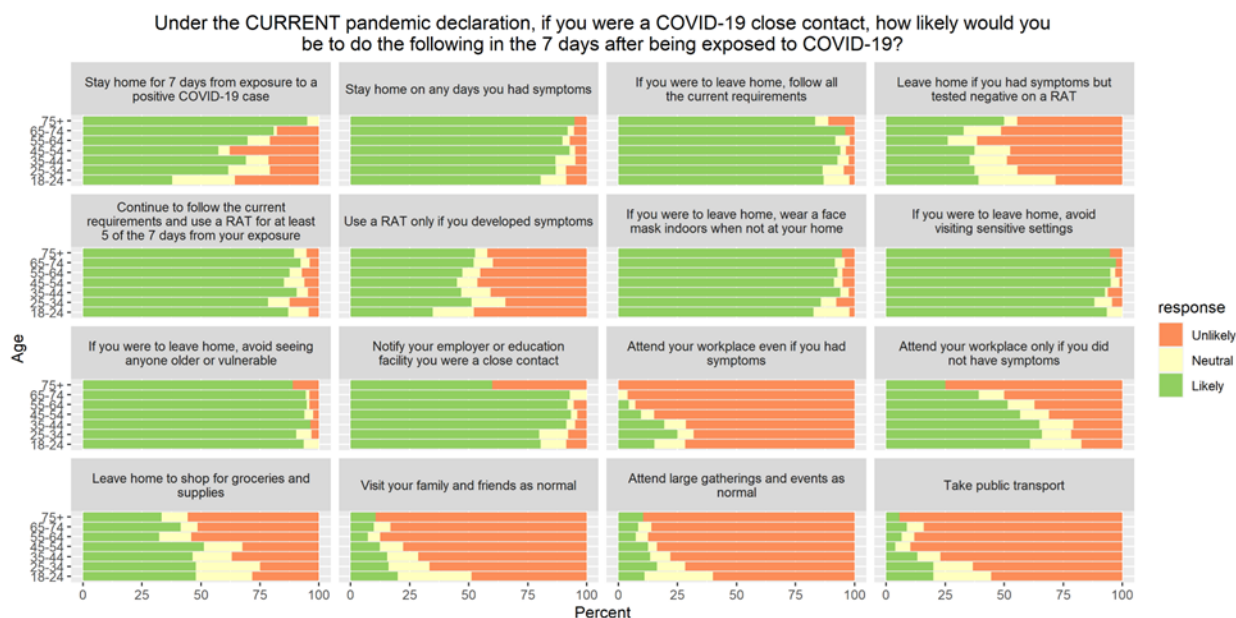


Figure 11 Potential behaviours as a household contact under the current pandemic declaration by age group

We compared the responses from participants who had previously tested positive and those who had never tested positive under this condition: if they were notified as a household/household-like contact and the pandemic declaration was lifted (see Figure 12). Participants who reported never testing positive for COVID-19 were more likely to report that they would stay home for seven days from exposure to a positive COVID-19 case (62%, 208/336) than participants who had previously tested positive (50%, 81/161). Participants who had never tested positive were also more likely to report that they would follow the current requirements and recommendations for household/household-like contacts than those who had previously tested positive (i.e., use a RAT only if they developed symptoms, wear a face mask indoors when not at their home, and continue to follow the current requirements and use a RAT for at least five of the seven days from their exposure).

Compared to participants who had never tested positive, those who had previously tested positive were more likely to leave home if they had symptoms but tested negative on a RAT (40%, 65/162 and 36%, 119/332 respectively), and leave home to shop for groceries (51%, 80/158 and 37%, 121/326 respectively).

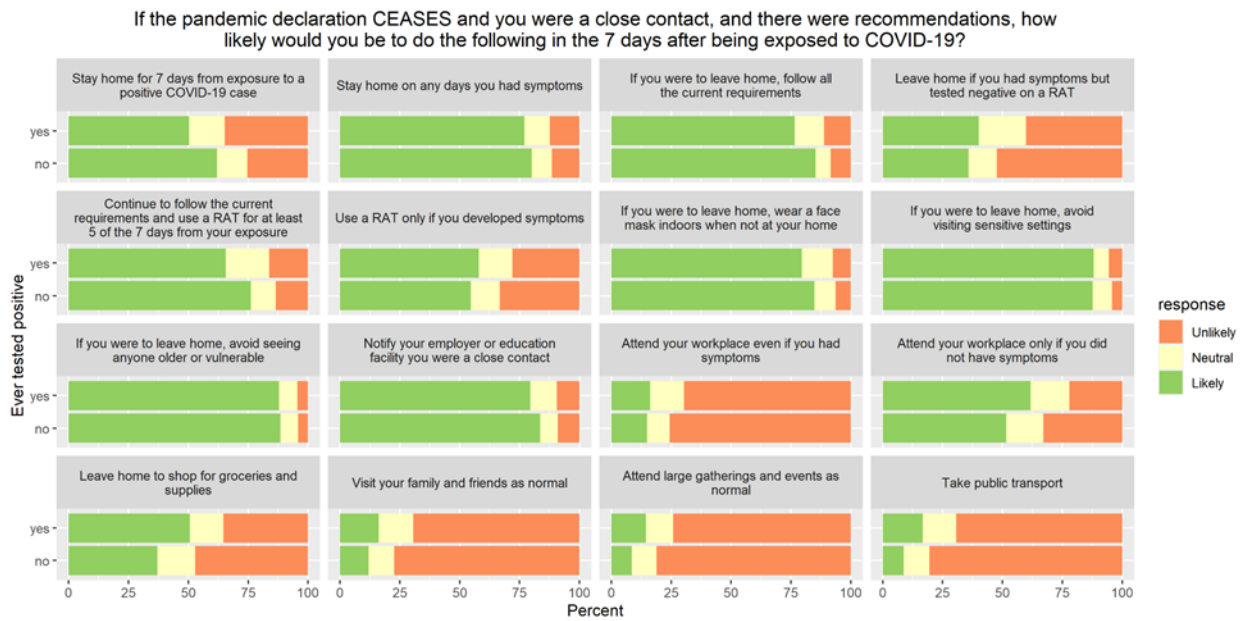


Figure 12 Potential behaviours as a household contact if the current pandemic declaration was moved for participants who had ever tested positive for COVID-19 and those who had never tested positive

* yes: have ever tested positive to COVID-19; no: have never tested positive to COVID-19

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