

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 WEDNESDAY 1 MARCH

Open letter from the Chief Medical Officer Professor Breda Smyth to older people in Ireland:

It's now almost three years since the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly brought the shutters down on our everyday lives. While necessary public health measures helped curb the spread of the virus, they had far-reaching consequences for us all. Those who suffered illness or loss of life paid the highest price. However, all of us shared the burden as we stayed at home and stopped doing many of the things that bring joy to our lives.

Many older people, having been asked in the early stages of the pandemic to stay at home and cocoon, found the pandemic particularly isolating. This request was made of you at a time of global uncertainty about a new, unpredictable virus. It was made to protect you. I have in the past acknowledged, and would like to again express my thanks to you, for adhering to this advice in such numbers. Your compliance with public health restrictions played a significant role in Ireland's successful response to the pandemic.

In doing as you were asked, you will have missed out on family moments, or precious time with friends and neighbours doing the things you always enjoyed. No one should underestimate the impact of this isolation or the sense of loneliness that comes from the sudden disconnect from family and community.

We know that there is a strong link between loneliness and chronic health conditions, including heart and lung disease, stroke, and disorders such as obesity. It's also linked to poorer mental health. We all recognise the warm feeling that comes with spending time with people close to us. That "feel-good" factor is vital to our health, so it's important that we rebuild the connections that may have been lost during the pandemic.

We know that many people still feel apprehensive about getting out and about. So, I would like to offer my reassurance that today we are – thankfully – in a much better place. We have access to safe, effective vaccines. We know these vaccines save lives and help protect us from the worst effects of COVID-19. Your vaccinations offer a high level of protection, so you can feel safe while engaging with others. We also have effective antiviral treatment.

The pandemic has taught us to embrace stronger personal protective behaviours like hand-cleaning and practising good respiratory etiquette. With measures like these, we are learning to live with COVID-19. But we cannot allow it to steal more years from us.

If you haven't yet returned to doing the things that you love, I am encouraging you to do so now. Spend time with grandchildren, re-join local clubs or activities or get involved in your local community. All of us can play our part, by reaching out to the older people in our lives. Their wisdom and experience can only enrich life for us all. Understandably, people may still feel anxious about COVID-19, particularly those with underlying health conditions. Anyone who feels safer by wearing a mask should be supported in their choice.

So today, take that first step, and reconnect.

Ends