(Beehive, 2022b) [26 Jan 2022] [Glossary]

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25 JANUARY 2022

Testing improvements see New Zealand well prepared for Omicron

HON DR AYESHA VERRALL(/MINISTER/HON-DR-AYESHA-VERRALL)

Health (/portfolio/labour-2020-2023/health)

New Zealand's PCR testing capacity can be increased by nearly 20,000 tests per day to deal with a surge in cases as part of our wider COVID-19 testing strategy, Associate Minister of Health Dr Ayesha Verrall said.

"We have continued to adapt our public health response to safeguard the health and wellbeing of all New Zealanders throughout this pandemic. This includes ensuring we have the best tools and technology in place to detect and help minimise the spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant," Dr Ayesha Verrall said.

"Our labs have already processed 5,906,843 tests to date and our highest testing day so far was 24 August 2021 where 49,736 tests were completed.

"With Omicron cases now in the North and South islands, testing, tracing and quickly isolating any COVID-19 cases and their contacts will be all the more important for protecting whānau and communities.

"A rapid rise in case numbers will require us to shift from identifying all infected individuals to being more targeted to those most at risk and those needed to maintain critical infrastructure.

"To do this, testing remains a cornerstone of our response.

"Nasopharyngeal PCR tests will continue to be used as the primary diagnostic test in our initial phase of dealing with Omicron in the community, but this will be supplemented by wider use of rapid antigen testing.

"We have made significant progress to refine our approach since the review undertaken by the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Testing Technical Advisory Group (TAG), led by Professor David Murdoch in October last year."

Since the time of the review the following actions have been implemented to ensure fit-for-purpose Covid-19 testing in New Zealand:

- Increased our PCR testing capacity from a maximum of 39,000 tests a day to a baseline of 58,000 tests. Surge capacity is now 77,600 tests, which can be sustained for 7 days
- Progressing the installation of automated technology designed to increase capacity in all testing laboratories to free up lab technicians and eliminate risk of mistakes with repetitive tasks
- Introduced saliva testing to 4,000 border workers
- Reviewed and revised the assessment criteria for Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) to make it easier to have a new product to undergo a full assessment.
- Continued to ensure any approved product meets minimum quality and standards suitable for use in New Zealand
- Doubled the number of types of RATs approved for import, supply and use in New Zealand and we will continue to approve more cases throughout this week.
- Engaged with manufacturers and suppliers of tests that might meet the criteria but who have not yet applied for approval for importation, supply and use in New Zealand.
- Expanded the authorisation so any New Zealand-based businesses with a registered New Zealand Business Number (NZBN) can import, supply, distribute, or sell approved RATs to any authorised persons or classes of persons without having to go through an authorised importer
- Using rapid PCR testing in certain hospital settings.

"From December 2021, businesses have been able to order approved rapid antigen tests direct from importers for use with their workforce. These tests are also used across our health system, including aged residential care.

"Rapid development of testing capability and capacity, using various testing modes which respond and adapt to changes in the virus has been a core aspect of our testing strategy. We have combined this with scientific, public health, human behaviour and operational considerations to establish robust testing regimes for different stages of the pandemic," Dr Ayesha Verrall said.

Further detail on how New Zealand will manage Omicron through the various phases of community spread will be announced on Wednesday.

TOP