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5 July 2022

s 9(2)(a)

By email: s 9(2)(a)
Ref: H202207823

Tēnā koe s 9(2)(a)

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) on 12 June 2022. You specifically asked:

“Antigen tests only detect infectious levels of virus, they do not detect historic infections like some PCR tests can do. Antigen tests are the best way of determining whether you are a risk to those around you”, how does this align with your advice that a negative RAT test is not required to end isolation?”

The Ministry acknowledges that there is the potential for individuals to test positive using a rapid antigen test (RAT) beyond the period where they are considered infectious. A positive RAT result only indicates the presence of SARS-CoV-2 antigens within the sample, and it is not able to determine whether the individual is currently infectious. Current research indicates that it is possible for individuals to test positive from a RAT beyond the average infectious period. Therefore, the current health guidelines do not require a negative test as a requirement for an individual to leave isolation. More information is available at: www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/about-covid-19/covid-19-what-we-know-about-infection-and-immunity.

The latest SARS-CoV-2 Variants of Concern update shows that once an individual contracts SARS-CoV-2, there is an average latency period (the time from infection until the person becomes infectious) of three to four days. However, this has been reported in some cases to be as long as six to eight days. This has also been supported by further research, which can be found at: academic.oup.com/cid/article/74/9/1678/6359063. During this time, RATs are unable to detect COVID-19 as the person is not infectious or symptomatic. Once a person develops symptoms, the viral load increases with detection using RATs occurring after 58 hours and usually peaking around day 4-5. This is when RATs are most likely to detect the presence of SAR-CoV-2 and display a positive result. References within the SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern update provide evidence in support of these statements. The update can be found at: www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/10-june-2022-variants-update.pdf.

The above evidence shows that the time periods for when a RAT can detect SARS-CoV-2 and when a person is infectious are similar, however, these do not align perfectly. It is for this reason

the Ministry recommends using a RAT primarily if you feel unwell, rather than for use at end of isolation periods. This is outlined on the Ministry's website at: www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/covid-19-testing/covid-19-test-results-and-their-accuracy. The Ministry strongly advises that individuals who test positive remain in isolation for seven days or until 24 hours after becoming symptom free. This aligns with the key message of staying home if you are feeling unwell, as outlined at: www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/covid-19-staying-home.

I trust this information fulfils your request. Under section 28(3) of the Act, you have the right to ask the Ombudsman to review any decisions made under this request. The Ombudsman may be contacted by email at: info@ombudsman.parliament.nz or by calling 0800 802 602.

Please note that this response, with your personal details removed, may be published on the Ministry website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests.

Nāku noa, nā



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