

§ 9(2)(a)

By email: § 9(2)(a)
Ref: H202200666

Tēnā koe § 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 27 January 2022 for:

“a copy of the current data held by the Ministry of Health, on the efficacy of the various mask types which are currently indicated for use in protection against the Omicron variant of Covid 19.

Specifically, I request documentation which indicates that masks have a value in protecting against Omicron. We have been told cloth masks are considered ineffective compared to other types, so your Department must have data or results of studies which indicate this. It is these specific documents that I am requesting.

Also, data sheets accompanying N95 masks indicate that they are ineffective against airborne particles. Can you please confirm this, or provide data to the contrary? It is also apparent that N95 masks are ineffective if worn by persons with facial hair. Is this accepted by your Department, ie. it is unacceptable to use these masks with facial hair. Please also provide your Department's protocol for the provision of training in the wearing of N95 masks, as such training is a clear requirement of the mask manufacturers.”

In response to your requests, in the order that they have been asked, I can confirm that the Ministry does not conduct scientific research or studies. Instead, the Ministry reviews international studies and evidence on mask wearing in the community setting.

As part of reviewing international evidence, the Ministry considers advice from international organisations including the World Health Organization (WHO), Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States, Public Health England, the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Australian jurisdictions, and a range of scientific and medical journals.

The information is collated through Ministry specialist technical advisory groups whose membership includes a variety of expert professions such as infection prevention and control, public health and infectious diseases and microbiology. When reviewing evidence, the Ministry ensures it is applicable to the current New Zealand situation and can be applied in context.

Our current advice for mask use in the community, including the type of masks that should be worn, aligns with advice from WHO, which can be found at:

www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-IPC_masks-2021.1

In terms of P2/N95 particulate respirators being ineffective against airborne particles, the Ministry does not support this claim. Our guidance recommends respirators should be worn to protect against exposure to airborne pathogens smaller than droplets (< 0.5 microns).

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for New Zealand's COVID-19 response is sourced and distributed as part of a nationally coordinated approach, managed by the Ministry's COVID-19 PPE Central Supply service.

PPE, including P2/N95 particulate respirators, distributed from the COVID-19 PPE Central Supply has gone through a robust quality assurance process with verified documentation and product certification. Products are approved by the Infection, Prevention and Control (IPC) Sub-Technical Advisory Group and the Clinical Oversight Group. These clinical groups consider the evidence to make informed decisions about whether products are fit for purpose in localised settings.

The Ministry has information on its website about the models of masks that we supply the most significant volumes of. This information is available at: www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-information-specific-audiences/covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-central-supply/covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-recommendations-health-and-disability-care-workers. Datasheet information on these P2/N95 particulate respirators is publicly available and can be found on manufacturers' websites.

Please note that consideration should be given to the specific mask specifications and the requirements of the setting in which they will be worn.

P2/N95 particulate respirators are not as effective if worn by people with facial hair, because the hair can prevent a proper seal from being achieved around the wearer's face. Every time a person needs to put on a P2/N95 particulate respirator it must be put on correctly according to the manufacturer's instructions and the wearer must perform a fit check (also called a 'user's seal check') to ensure they have fitted the respirator correctly.

It is essential that an adequate seal around the nose, mouth and chin is achieved to provide protection to the wearer. The Ministry advises that all staff needing to wear a respirator have cleanly shaven skin, or any facial hair must not encroach on the edge of the respirator. If an adequate seal cannot be achieved, the risk of infection to the wearer is increased. Therefore, P2/N95 particulate respirators – or any mask – cannot guarantee respiratory protection for people who have facial hair.

Before requests for P2/N95 particulate respirators are authorised and distributed from the Ministry's COVID-19 PPE Central Supply, eligible health care providers are required to complete and submit a fit testing declaration form to provide evidence that their workforce has been "fit tested" for P2/N95 particulate respirators.

Fit testing ensures the right model/type of a particulate respirator is used by the wearer. The fit test ensures that an adequate seal is achieved around the face of the wearer to provide respiratory protection. It is the responsibility of each provider to ensure that they arrange an accredited fit testing service to ensure that their staff have the correct respirator best suited to their face shape and that they train their workers on the process of fit checking and donning their particulate respirators.

The Ministry is aware that access to fit testing services currently remains constrained and is not always available. In the absence of fit testing, the Ministry has deemed that an exemption can be applied due to these exceptional circumstances and have therefore recommended as an interim solution that fit checking/user seal checking must be undertaken each and every time the user dons a particulate respirator as described by the manufacturer's instructions. There is more information at: www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-information-specific-audiences/covid-19-personal-protective-equipment-central-supply/covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-recommendations-health-and-disability-care-workers#fit

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



Kirsten Stephenson
Group Manager, COVID-19 Strategic Operations
COVID-19 Health System Response