



14 December 2022

s 9(2)(a)

By email: s 9(2)(a)
Ref: H2022017032

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 Manatū Hauora (the Ministry of Health) on 16 November 2022 for information regarding risks to those who have yet to have COVID-19. You requested:

“Any information which discloses whether Ministry staff and officials, including chief science advisor Dr Ian Town, have taken into consideration the relative immunity of, and risks to, those who have not caught covid when considering whether to expand second booster eligibility to under 50s.

For context, I am asking this because Dr Town said at a press conference today that the risk of hospitalisation under the age of 40 from covid-19 was "really quite low" given the combination of the first booster and the "hybrid-immunity boost" from BA.5 infection. However, this reasoning presumably does not apply to those who have not caught covid.

I am requesting this information on an urgent basis given that there is currently a third wave of covid and yet there does not seem to be any protection or consideration afforded to those under 50 who have not caught covid, whose single booster will now be some 9 to 12 months ago.”

The Manatū Hauora guidance and recommendations on COVID-19 vaccines are based on several factors, including recommendations made by the COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group (CV TAG). More information about CV TAG and publicly available documents can be found at the following link: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/leadership-ministry/expert-groups/covid-19-vaccine-technical-advisory-group-cv-tag.

To date, over 1.8 million people in New Zealand have reported a positive COVID-19 test at least once, and the true number who have had COVID-19 is likely higher. The overwhelming majority of those infections were with Omicron variants - initially BA.2, but since July 2022, BA.5 has become the dominant variant. This information is taken into consideration when assessing the need for additional booster doses, as hybrid immunity will increase the level of immunity amongst the population.

Second boosters are recommended for those under 50 who are in at-risk groups such as:

- Residents of aged care and disability care facilities
- Severely immunocompromised people

It is also available to:

- Māori and Pacific peoples aged 40 years and over (from 18 November 2022)
- Health, aged care and disability workers aged 30 years and over

Protection conferred against severe disease and death by the vaccine remains high for otherwise healthy people under the age of 50.

There are numerous prevention measures currently under active consideration at Manatū Hauora, including the need for additional boosters, which groups should be eligible, and how long these groups should wait before getting an additional booster. A number of factors need to be considered when making a recommendation on additional boosters, including the length of protection provided by hybrid immunity, risk of adverse outcomes from COVID-19, risk assessment of variants in circulation, effectiveness of vaccines and mitigating vaccine fatigue that has been observed.

Medsafe is currently considering applications for two bivalent vaccines from Pfizer, one that contains mRNA which encodes spike proteins from the Omicron subvariant BA.1, and one which encodes them from BA.4/5. CV TAG has now recommended that from early 2023 New Zealand should transition from its current Pfizer vaccine to the newly available Pfizer BA.4/5 bivalent vaccine, subject to Medsafe approval. The group's review of available evidence has concluded that these bivalent vaccines are likely to be more effective against Omicron subvariants than earlier vaccines, so providing an additional bivalent booster dose as we head into winter next year will add an additional level of protection.

There are several steps that need to be taken to support any roll-out of bivalent vaccines, including consideration of eligibility, advancing discussion around supply and ensuring we have the infrastructure in place to get the doses where they are needed. Ministry of Health will continue to review our guidelines and update them as needed. Once final decisions have been made, this information will be shared with the public.

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 Manatū Hauora website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests.

Nāku noa, nā



Dave Henderson
**Interim Group Manager, Intelligence, Surveillance and Knowledge
Public Health Agency | Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui**