

27 June 2022

s 9(2)(a)

By email: s 9(2)(a)
Ref: H202206643

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 19 May 2022 for information relating to COVID-19 positive results after isolation. You specifically requested:

Please provide the evidence underpinning your advice that a positive result after isolation for COVID-19 can be ignored.

On 27 May 2022 you clarified and asked for the following information:

There is of course some chance that a person with a positive RAT might not be infectious. I want to know what your assessment of that risk was. In your view, is it 5% of cases that are not infectious despite a positive test? 90%? How did you weigh this?

Some percentage of people will be non-infectious 24 hours after symptoms have passed after isolation despite a positive RAT; others will still be infectious. Any rational setup would set some critical threshold such that, if the actual risk of infectiousness is below that level, there is no need to continue isolating on a positive test, but that a negative test would be required for ending isolation if the likelihood of being infectious was higher than the threshold. What threshold was set and how? And what evidence did you use to establish the actual likelihood of being non-infectious despite a positive RAT after 24-hours symptom-free?

The Ministry acknowledges that there is the potential that a positive Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) result taken following seven days of isolation could indicate that an individual may potentially still be within their infectious period. However, a positive RAT result only indicates the presence of SARS-CoV-2 antigens within the sample, and it is unable to determine whether the individual is currently infectious. Current research indicates that it is possible for individuals to test positive from RAT tests 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 as found on the Ministry website 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 found at: academic.oup.com/cid/article/74/9/1678/6359063 During this time RAT devices 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 RAT devices occurring after 58 hours

and usually peaking around day four to five. This is when RAT devices 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 accessed at: www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/10-june-2022-variants-update.pdf

The above evidence shows the time periods 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, as outlined on our website here: www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/covid-19-testing/covid-19-test-results-and-their-accuracy, rather than for use at the end of isolation periods. 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; if you are feeling unwell, stay home 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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