

Information on critical workers in the health and disability system

25 February 2022

All health and disability services and their workers can continue to operate under [the COVID-19 Protection Framework](#) also known as the 'traffic light' system, at Green, Orange and Red settings.

In response to community transmission of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, the Government has released a three-phase response. If Phases two or three are in effect, critical health workers who are close contacts can utilise Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) to ensure they can return to work during their isolation period, providing they produce a negative test prior to their shift. This reflects the critical nature of their work including the necessity of these services to prevent death or serious harm and that these services can only be conducted in person in the workplace.

Definition of 'critical workers' and 'critical health services' in the context of the Omicron response

Within the health and disability settings, a 'critical worker' is somebody who works for a critical health service, in a role that:

- must be performed **in person** at the workplace; and
- requires a person with particular skills; and
- must continue to be performed to:
 - prevent an immediate risk of death or serious injury to a person or animal; or
 - prevent serious harm (social, economic or physical) to significant numbers in the community.

Any health and disability worker that meets the above definition, works for one of the critical health services listed below, and is identified as a positive case of COVID-19 or a close contact, should refer to the [guidance for critical health services during Omicron](#).

All other workers across the health and disability system are still able to operate under the COVID-19 Protection Framework, and close contacts should instead follow the self-isolation guidelines highlighted on the [Ministry of Health's Contact Tracing page](#) in the event of a COVID-19 exposure.

List of critical health services:

- Acute care services any service with an acute presentation element (physiotherapy after an injury, optometry with a sudden onset red eye)
 - urgent and after hour clinics
 - hospital services – inpatient and ED
 - acute dental services
- Aged care services
- Ambulance services (including air ambulances)
- Caregivers providing care at individuals homes
- Care facilities (eg, rest homes / retirement villages)
- Community care services (eg, Well Child Tamariki Ora, B4SC, SUDI, Ear and Vision Screening, Family Planning and Youth Services)
- COVID-19 response (including IMAC and CARM)
- Cemeteries
- Crematoria
- Disability Support Services (including equipment and modification services)
- District Health Boards (and all their facilities) including services subcontracted for urgent care by a DHB
- Funeral homes and services
- General practice services
- Health and Disability Commission
- Health equipment producers
- Health Quality and Safety Commission
- Home and Community Support Services (if they are needed to prevent an immediate risk of death or serious injury to a person or prevent serious harm)
- Homecare Medical services
- Housing First and other transitional housing services
- Iwi / Māori health services
- Kaiāwhina services
- Maternity services
- Medical Laboratory services
- Medicine suppliers
- Mortuary services
- Needs Assessment Service Coordinators (NASCs)
- Needle exchange
- NZ Blood Service
- Medical laboratories
- Mental health and addiction services
- Pacific health services
- Palliative care services
- Paramedic services
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) suppliers
- Pharmaceutical services
- Pharmacies
- Primary care clinics (including private Allied Health providers delivering acupuncture, audiology, Chinese medicine, chiropractic, osteopathy, physiotherapy and podiatry services)
- Public Health Units
- Screening services
- services critical to maintain the operations of critical health services (e.g. cleaning, waste, linen and laundry services)
- Specialist dermatology services
- Telehealth services
- Vaccination services
- Whānau ora services

Critical health services in the health and disability system have been identified as those that meet one or more of the following five criteria:

1. A health and disability service that provides direct, hands-on care and support that maintains a person's necessities of life.
2. A health and disability service that ensures the safety of the critical workforce.
3. Disability Support Services (DSS) and Aged Care services, including Home and Community Support Services (HCSS), that support high-risk and vulnerable client groups.
4. Crisis support for people who feel unwell or are unsafe (e.g., funded helplines, refuges and family violence services, sexual violence crisis services).

5. A health and disability service that enables the delivery of equitable care to those people most at risk of harm.

If the service you provide does not fall under any of the critical health services groups highlighted above, and you believe a new group should be included, you should write to the Ministry of Health at info@healthworkforce.govt.nz and confirm which of the five criteria your service meets in your email.

Access to rapid antigen tests (RATs) for critical health services

Many health and disability employers have already been front loaded with a supply of RATs. They include;

- COVID response organisations – DHBs, GPs, pharmacies, PHOs providing frontline services, and community health providers (and Police, MIQFs and first responders)
- High-density vulnerable populations – ARC, hospice and other residential healthcare facilities (and Corrections and Youth Justice facilities).

If you are an organisation, an employee or a contractor delivering a critical health service that has not been front loaded with a supply of RATs from the Ministry of Health, please register for the [Close Contact Exemption Scheme through MBIE's Business Connect Website](#).

More information about how to order RATs after being registered as part of the Close Contact Exemption Scheme, and RAT testing guidance for critical workers during phases 2 and 3 of the Omicron response is available on the Ministry of Health's [rapid antigen testing page](#).

Assumptions for defining critical health services

1. The list of critical health services has been updated to reflect New Zealand's COVID-19 Protection Framework, which has replaced the 'Alert Level' system.
2. If disruptions are caused by Omicron and operational changes need to be made, the distinction between critical and non-critical health and disability services (and the implications of these definitions) are likely to be in place for 2-3 months. The list will be revised from time-to-time where appropriate and necessary.

Key questions and answers

1. What is the definition of health services that would be considered critical?

Any entity providing a critical health service (as defined above) is considered critical. Critical services will continue to provide the basic necessities of life for everyone in New Zealand.

This list is not exhaustive, and agencies can be added to the list if they contact the Ministry of Health and an assessment by the Ministry concludes that they are critical. An assessment can be requested by emailing info@healthworkforce.govt.nz, and determining which of the five criteria your agency meets.

2. Are maternity workers considered critical?

The Ministry of Health consider all health workers, who provide care to pregnant and recently birthed women/people to be essential and therefore to continue their work, while taking appropriate precautions, during the Covid-19 response.

3. Are there any health, disability, or aged care support services that would be excluded from the definition of critical services?

Broadly speaking, all health-related services that are not related to maintaining the necessities of life are excluded. However, there will also be health and disability services that are normally considered to be 'non-critical' that may be considered critical under certain (usually time-limited) circumstances, such as when the Ministry of Health has to change their operational response to address the possible disruptions due to Omicron. Please note that all health services can continue to operate under Red settings. Critical health services are a subset of all health, disability or aged care support services, which may then have critical workers within that service. These services can therefore access RATs to ensure they continue during an Omicron outbreak.

Household management services

Home support services for older people or people with disabilities would be considered critical if they are needed to prevent an immediate risk of death or serious injury to a person or prevent serious harm. For example, household management services such as house-cleaning in most cases is not required to prevent an immediate risk of injury or harm so, most people could cope if this service has to stop for a few weeks. However, if a person's health or disability means that they cannot keep their house clean enough to stay healthy, the support they receive to do so would be considered critical.

Social connection services

All services provided in the health and disability system that might be considered related to social contact rather than health, would be excluded from the definition of 'critical'. For example, volunteers taking the elderly for a drive, or visiting aged care homes for the purposes of doing arts and crafts is good for mental health and morale but these activities are not required to prevent an immediate risk of injury or harm. Therefore, these services do not meet the criteria and would not be considered a critical service.

4. Are students who are providing health and disability services considered to be providing critical services?

Students undertaking a placement as part of completing their academic programme may start or continue in that placement only in accordance with COVID-19 Protection Framework settings. It is understood that students might be asked to provide clinical care in Health Care Assistant (or similar) roles when, due to Protection Framework setting requirements, they are not able to carry on in their assigned training placement. Students performing critical services defined in this document are considered critical workers.

5. Are pharmacies considered to be critical health services?

Yes. Pharmacies provide health-related services that are related to maintaining the necessities of life, including processing repeat prescriptions. However, not every staff member in a pharmacy is automatically critical.

6. How will enforcement officers know whether a health or disability service worker is considered 'critical' or not?

Those services explicitly listed in the list of critical health services above are automatically considered critical. Workers that can demonstrate they work in one of those services should be considered critical.