

# DG Memorandum

## National laboratory network unable to process PCR samples older than 5 days

---

**To:** Dr Ashley Bloomfield, Director-General of Health

---

**Copy to:** Darryl Carpenter, Group Manager, Testing and Supply

---

**From:** Bridget White, Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Health System Response.

---

**Date:** 20 February 2022

---

**For your:** Information

---

### Purpose of report

1. This memo provides you with an update on the clinical decision of the national laboratory testing network not to process PCR samples that are older than 5 days and the rationale for this decision.

### National laboratory network now having to prioritise samples

2. The national laboratory testing network (the network) is now at capacity given pooling samples is no longer viable given positivity rates and COVID-19 cases in the community continue to grow. The increasing testing demand far exceeds the network's testing capacity, as anticipated in the COVID-19 Omicron Response Plan.
3. The Phases Two and Three testing framework within the COVID-19 Omicron Response Plan includes increasingly moving away from PCR to rapid antigen tests (RATs) in efforts to preserve PCR capacity for high priority groups.
4. The network's testing plans includes prioritisation of samples as they manage laboratory capacity and increased testing demand. The Auckland region has experienced a range of between 20-25k PCR samples per day last week, with only 15k PCR test capacity per day, leaving a daily accumulation of up to 10k per day backlog.
5. The sharp increase in the backlog is in part due to pooling of samples no longer being an option as positivity rates have doubled since the 4 February, from 2 to 4% to now 4 to 8% (18 February). In addition, the network has not been able to send samples to other regions for processing due to the increase in the number of community cases and high positivity rates experienced in those regions as well.
6. The use of SurvCodes by CTCs and GPs assists the network to prioritise the samples according to clinical and public health priorities. High priority samples include symptomatic and close contacts and lower priority samples include asymptomatic people.

7. The network focuses on high priority samples first and these are typically reported as tests completed within 24-48 hours. However, these turnaround times are coming under increasing pressure due to the large number of samples coming through the network. Today, the testing turn-around time for laboratories was 32 percent within 24 hours and total tests processed was close to 28,000. As a result, some lower priority samples have not been processed and are now exceeding 5 days.
8. On Friday 18 February, the network confirmed that samples older than 5 days will not be processed for the following reasons:
  - a. sample integrity is compromised after five days
  - b. there is limited clinical value of a test result to inform patient management after five days.
  - c. samples older than five days are generally the lower priority samples (such as testing asymptomatic people)
9. For samples that were not processed within 5 days, the impacted people will be informed by text notification and directed to contact Healthline for further instructions if they are close contacts or symptomatic. Healthline will follow their standard triaging processes to inform whether another test is required or not.
10. There is a risk that some priority samples will be missed because of this decision and won't be processed within 5 days. However, interaction with Healthline will ensure the impacted people are directed to get another test, if required.

## **Communicating the change**

11. Given that the network has already made the clinical decision not to process samples older than 5 days, the Ministry will need to quickly communicate the decision and the rationale to Public Health Units, Healthline, Ministers and then the wider public.
12. The Ministry needs to make people aware that their samples may not be processed by the laboratory and the reasons why. It also important that people understand what other public health measures they need to follow if their PCR sample is unable to be processed. This includes reiterating key messages around the who should be seeking a test, and the role of PCR and RATs as we quickly move into Phase Three.
13. We anticipate go live from midnight Monday once we ensure Healthline and the network have been informed and made the necessary changes and key stakeholders are aware.
14. A communication plan along with key messages, FAQs and a draft press release are attached in Appendix 1.

## Recommendations

I recommend that you:

- a) **Note** the clinical decision of the national laboratory network not to process samples older than 5 days.
- b) **Note** the communications plan, messages and FAQ's for communicating the decision and the rationale to the Ministers, Public Health Units, Healthline, the network and the general public.
- c) **Note** the timeline for implementation can be from midnight Monday 21 February 2022 subject to the necessary operational details being in place.

Ashley Bloomfield

**Director-General of Health**

**Te Tumu Whakarae mō e Haoura**

Date:

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

## Appendix 1 - Communications Plan: Changes to COVID-19 Testing

A high demand on testing laboratories during this Omicron outbreak is seeing a number of tests unable to be processed after 5 days.

It is important that we prioritise the analysis of tests, to ensure quick turn-around for those at most risk. This includes those that are symptomatic and at highest risk of serious illness and those most likely to have been exposed, including close contacts of known cases.

Our communications to the public as the outbreak escalates, will be focused on advising:

- that if people have developed symptoms to get a new test,
- if they have not developed symptoms just to monitor themselves, and that anyone who is asymptomatic and has not been asked to get a test (eg not been at a Location of Interest, close contact, health provider request) will be turned away.

### Key messages:

- As expected from overseas experience, testing laboratories in some regions have reached a point at which they are not physically able to analyse all the samples they are receiving.
- Some of the samples will be determined as low risk i.e asymptomatic and may not be processed.
- After five days test samples will not be processed as results are not considered reliable.
- This means that in Phase 3 we need to conserve our PCR testing capacity to support those that need it the most – the communities who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 outbreaks.
- People who have not yet had a result — and who were not symptomatic when they got tested — may be asked to be retested if they are a household or close contact.
- Everyone who has been tested will be contacted. Please remember that Healthline cannot give test results.

### Approach going forward

As we expected Omicron cases continue to grow in the community across New Zealand so we must again adapt our testing regime to respond to a rapidly evolving situation.

To maintain current levels of PCR testing we will widen the use of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) during Phase 3.

### Widening the use of RATs

Starting in Auckland, we are working with DHBs to provide them with additional RATs to assist in taking the pressure off lab processing times and lessen wait times at testing sites.

Greater access to RATs will initially be rolled out to other high-demand sites around New Zealand. Sites will determine which test (PCR or a RAT) is best for people. People who are directed to have a RAT will be given advice on what to do if the test is positive.

### Q&A

#### **It has been 5 days (or longer) since I had a COVID test but I have not received a result – what do I do?**

If you have been identified as a close contact and haven't had a result by Day 5 you will receive a text message to call Healthline (if you registered a cellphone number on your test form). They will provide further advice. If you registered a landline number on your testing form you will get a phone call to advise you what to do.

### **Do I need to continue to isolate if I don't get a result?**

Yes, you should continue to self-isolate for the recommended time if you are a close contact or a household contact. After you have completed isolation, and if you do not feel symptomatic, you can leave self-isolation.

### **If I haven't had a test result after 5 days, when will I get one?**

You will receive a text if your sample is not been able to be processed. If you are not symptomatic or not a close contact, you don't need another test. No further isolation required.

If you are a close contact or symptomatic, please contact Healthline and seek their advice for what to do next. It is still important that you remain isolating at home for the relevant period if you are a close contact (10 days for a household close contact, 7 days for other close contacts)

### **Is there a risk that I am positive for COVID-19 but I don't get a formal test result to confirm?**

If you are asymptomatic and not considered high risk, you may not get a test result.

If you are a close contact or symptomatic, please contact Healthline (0800 358 5453) and seek their advice for what to do next. It is still important that you remain isolating at home for the relevant period if you are a close contact (10 days for a household close contact, 7 days for other close contacts)

### **If I haven't had my test result after 5 days but I start to feel unwell, what should I do?**

You will receive a text if your sample is not been able to be processed.

If you are a close contact or symptomatic, please contact Healthline (0800 358 5453) or contact your doctor and seek their advice for what to do next. It is still important that you remain isolating at home for the relevant period if you are a close contact (10 days for a household close contact, 7 days for other close contacts)

### **What is the cost of a RAT if I am directed to have one at a CTC?**

All COVID-19 testing including RATs is free under the public health response.

### **Who should have a PCR test?**

Only those with symptoms or who have been identified as close contacts of a case, or have been directed by a health professional for clinical management, may get a PCR test. The CTC and GPs determine the appropriate test for the person (PCR, RATs or if appropriate, no test)

Also, if you have a positive RATs, you will need to have a PCR to confirm. PCR testing is still the most definitive method of confirming someone has COVID-19.

### **Any other advice?**

It's still important to keep up with the basic healthcare prevention measures – stay home if you're sick, get a booster, wash your hands, wear your mask, scan in and maintain social distancing where possible.

## Timeline / Channels

<b>Date:</b>	<b>What/channel:</b>	<b>Audience:</b>	<b>Who:</b>
21 Feb	Monday Prime Minister and Ministers meeting	Key Ministers and Prime Minister	MOH
21 Feb	1pm Media Statement: Communication regarding laboratory no longer processing samples greater than 5 days	Public	MOH
21 Feb	Website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <a href="https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/assessment-and-testing-covid-19">https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/assessment-and-testing-covid-19</a></li> <li>- <a href="https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/assessment-and-testing-covid-19/receiving-positive-covid-19-test-result">https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/assessment-and-testing-covid-19/receiving-positive-covid-19-test-result</a></li> </ul>	Public	MOH
As required	Ministerial announcements / Talking points	Public	MOH and DPMC
21 Feb	Unite Against COVID website – updated advice	Public	DPMC
21 Feb	DPMC updates (COVID comms)	Govt agencies	DPMC
21 Feb	Awhina app	Health sector	MOH
20 – 22 Feb	Facebook - reminder only symptomatic to be tested <i>and</i> what to do if you haven't had your test result	Public	MOH and DPMC
21 Feb onwards	COVID-19 test, result overdue – Text advice due to delay	People tested	MOH
22 Feb	Health Key messages newsletter	DHB, PHU comms leads, health sector	MOH
21 Feb	Q&A and key messages - Whakarongorau (Healthline)	Public	MOH
21 Feb	Healthpoint website – Where to get tested	Public	Healthpoint
21 Feb	Advise Health sector of update via email - PHU, DHBs, GPS, Lab leads	Sector	MOH
w/c 21 Feb	DG update	Health Sector	MOH

## **Media release**

### **Omicron response testing changes**

XXX says updates to New Zealand's COVID-19 testing approach should bolster resources as cases of Omicron in the community continue to rise.

Throughout New Zealand's response to the Omicron outbreak, the objective continues to be to slow the spread and protect our vulnerable communities.

"The current rise in daily numbers and hospitalisations is entirely expected. At the same time, demand for testing around the country is also on the increase.

"Testing continues to be one of our best defences against COVID-19. As demand for testing has grown, some COVID-19 test results for Auckland and Waikato are currently taking longer to process at laboratories.

"One of the changes we are confident will make a positive difference is making rapid antigen tests available at Community Testing Centres around Auckland from Monday morning.

"If people who need to get tested fit appropriate clinical criteria, they will be given a rapid antigen test.

"People who are directed to have a rapid antigen test will be given advice on what to do if they have a positive result. At the current time, they will likely be advised that they need to have a PCR test to confirm the positive result."

XXX says to manage the climbing number of tests needing processing, samples will be prioritised to ensure the highest risk samples are processed first.

"These will include highly symptomatic people, our vulnerable communities, and close contacts of known cases."

"Our hard-working lab staff need to ensure that samples are consistently turned around quicker. Lower risk samples from asymptomatic people which are over five days will not be processed," says XXX.

"This really reinforces just how critical it is that only the people that need a test the most should go for a test.

"If you are asymptomatic and not considered high risk, you may well not get a test result. But you must continue to remain isolating at home for the relevant period (10 days for a household contact, 7 days for a close contact).

"These changes are designed to protect our most vulnerable communities and at risk people, while preparing other New Zealanders for a further rise in cases.

"New Zealand has one of the best vaccination rates in the world, and we want to continue to preserve our resources and our health system for the most at-risk amongst us," says XXX.