

Saliva Testing for COVID-19

September 2021

Saliva testing for COVID-19 is being used for surveillance testing in New Zealand, where people may have been exposed to COVID-19 through their work and have regular tests though they don't have any symptoms. People who have symptoms of COVID-19 still need to get a nasopharyngeal swab taken by a healthcare professional.

If someone's saliva test produces a positive result, at the moment in New Zealand we still require a nasopharyngeal swab.

Saliva testing has some specific advantages. Samples can be self-collected without supervision, avoiding possible exposure for healthcare professionals and the need for, and cost of, personal protective equipment (PPE).

Being less invasive than the nasal swab, saliva testing is done more frequently, which can shorten the time between someone contracting the virus and confirmation of a case. This means we can get onto managing cases sooner, reducing the risk of community transmission.

More frequent testing also provides more effective surveillance for a vaccinated workforce. Vaccinated people who catch COVID-19 may only have very mild or no symptoms, but can still spread the virus.

Ensuring a saliva sample is not contaminated is important. For this reason, current New Zealand protocols for saliva testing instruct an individual to abstain from eating, drinking, cleaning teeth, chewing gum, smoking or vaping for 30 minutes prior to the sample being collected.

Saliva testing for COVID-19 uses the same laboratory test to confirm a case as the nasopharyngeal swab, reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT PCR). PCR testing takes several hours and is not considered a rapid test. While results can be turned around in a few hours in urgent cases, they typically take 24–48 hours from when a sample is taken.



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HP 7849