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Government announces boost to RAT test supplies



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1

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Health minister Dr Shane Reti announced plans to improve access to free COVID-19 RATs

“Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora will procure supplies to enable the ongoing provision of free RATs through until 30 June”

The Government will increase the supply of free COVID-19 rapid antigen tests (RATs) until June this year.

The country’s current inventory was set to expire in March. But health minister **Shane Reti announced the new supply to improve access today.**

“Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora will procure supplies to enable the ongoing provision of free RATs through until 30 June,” he says in the announcement.

“These free RATs will be available through the established national network of distribution providers, comprising health providers and some pharmacies.”

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Dr Reti says he is awaiting advice from officials for the availability of free tests after 1 July.

“Many other countries have already decreased the wide distribution of free RATs. However, this approach will ensure New Zealand continues to have good stocks of tests available as we enter winter,” he says. “Health New Zealand is purchasing a further five million RATs. These costs can be met from existing budgets for COVID-19 services.”



Health minister Shane Reti [Image: Government House]

RNZCGP response

RNZCGP medical director and specialist GP Luke Bradford welcomes the announcement.

“It’s an extension of the accessibility of the tests, which is good, and I’m always going to be supportive of that.”

He says it is also essential that GPs and practices have access to an ongoing supply of RATs.

“They not only ensure we are able to keep our staff and patients safe and also ensure we can identify those individuals who need antivirals quickly,” Dr Bradford says.

“Whether or not we continue to have free tests available for the general public when we don’t have free tests available for the flu or RSV is another question.”

COVID-19 continues to feature

Te Whatu Ora national director of the National Public Health Service **Nick Chamberlain says the free tests are a vital tool** to help manage the virus.

“With COVID-19 very much still circulating in the community and continuing to impact hospital admission rates, current clinical and public health advice supports the ongoing provision of free RATs for COVID-19 to ensure the effective ongoing management of outbreaks,” Dr Chamberlain, a specialist GP, says in the media release.

“This means RATs will still be widely available to the public at no cost through our national network of participating providers, including some pharmacies, who can continue to order supplies from us as normal. Likewise, the wider health sector can also continue to access supplies from Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora as required.

“We strongly encourage people to make the most of the continued free access and to keep testing if they feel unwell or think they may have COVID-19. We also encourage them to report their RAT result, as confirmation of a positive result enables people to be connected with any help and support they might need and provides vital insight on the number of active COVID-19 cases across the country.”

Board update

Dr Chamberlain had also updated the Te Whatu Ora board on the virus at its 26 January meeting. He highlighted that the country now appeared to have passed the peak of the latest surge in case numbers, but the virus hadn't gone away.

All COVID-19 indicators had remained elevated since October, Dr Chamberlain said. With more concerts and events over the summer, infection rates had risen among young people. The latest wave had also seen higher hospital admission rates than during the last peak in April 2023.

“Those that are aged over 30, but particularly those who are over 60 with multiple health conditions, need to get boosted,” he said.

Dr Chamberlain said 17,728 people were vaccinated against COVID-19 in the week to 19 January, but that was still down by 10,000 on the week before Christmas, suggesting a rush before the holiday season.

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