

Phase Three of the Omicron Outbreak: Guidance for employers

New Zealand has moved into Phase Three of the government's Omicron response plan.

Read on for an update on how this might affect your workers.

Rapid Antigen Testing

Rapid Antigen Tests (RAT) are to be the primary form of testing in the community. Businesses are encouraged to use RATs as a form of surveillance testing in the workplace. Approved RATs are expected to become available for the public to purchase from retail outlets from March.

Rapid Antigen Testing and Close Contacts

As in Phase Two, a key aspect of Phase Three is ensuring our critical workforces can continue to operate in the face of rising case numbers. The close contact worker exemptions introduced in Phase Two will continue to operate in Phase Three.

The **key difference** is that non-household contacts are not required to isolate in Phase Three. Only cases, household and household-like contacts are required to isolate.

The schemes below operate to allow certain workers who are household, and household-like contacts to continue to work, under specific conditions. Non-household contacts can continue to work as normal, and self-monitor for symptoms.

Close Contact Exemption Scheme

The Close Contact Exemption Scheme (CCES) is designed for businesses that fall outside of the critical health and disability sector, but that are still essential services (e.g., supermarkets, pharmacies, and principal accommodation).

Under CCES, workers identified as household contacts can continue to work if they are vaccinated, asymptomatic, and return a negative RAT prior to each day/ shift of their isolation period.

To determine whether your business is eligible for CCES, a self-assessment tool is available on MBIE's website. Businesses who are eligible may then register as a "critical service" (again on the MBIE website) and may operate in accordance with the scheme. Once a business is registered as a critical service, workers at that business will be able to collect free RAT kits from a local collection site listed on the Healthpoint website.

"Bubble of one" for non-public facing roles

Any business may allow a household contact worker to return to work if they can maintain a 'bubble of one' while at work, and if their role is not public facing. They must be vaccinated and asymptomatic, but are not required to use RATs for each day/ shift they work during their isolation period.

Further restrictions apply, including wearing a medical grade face-covering at all times, using a dedicated bathroom, and travelling alone to, from and around work.

"Test to return" for critical health and disability workers

Under this framework, "critical workers" providing "critical health and disability services" that are identified as household contacts can continue to work if they are vaccinated, asymptomatic, and return a negative RAT for each day/ shift of this isolation period.

Visit the Ministry of Health website for more information on who is considered a "critical worker" and what is considered a "critical health and disability service".

Isolation and quarantine

Cases are required to isolate for 10 days following receipt of a positive PCR or RAT test.

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Household contacts (except CCES, bubble of one and critical workers) are required to isolate from the day the first person in their household receives their positive result, until they complete their 10 days of self-isolation and are released. A test must be completed on day 3 and day 10 of the isolation period.

Workers identified as close contacts who then go on to contract COVID will be required to isolate for up to 20 days. We suggest businesses implement contingency plans to account for staff absence for this period of time where working from home is not possible.

Case investigation and contact tracing

Cases will use a self-investigation tool to self-notify contacts.

Household contacts will be notified via text.

Contact tracing teams will focus on identifying and tracing those who have visited high-risk locations such as hospital or aged care facility.

Want to know more?

If you have any questions about the Omicron response as it affects your workers, please contact our specialist [Employment Team](#).