

Rapid antigen tests more widely available in schools and early learning

16 Mar 2022

Nearly a million more rapid antigen tests are being made available and easier to access in schools and early learning centres from today.

Schools, kura and early learning centres will now be provided with rapid antigen tests to give to symptomatic children, young people and staff, and the people in their households.

The Ministry of Education currently has several hundred thousand tests to hand and will receive nearly a million more over the next week to be distributed through its regional offices. Schools, kura and early learning services can opt-in to receive a supply of tests.

The goal is to keep schools and early learning centres open, and the advice and feedback I have received from the education sector is that greater access to rapid antigen testing could help them to do that.

I know this is an uncertain time for a lot of us and we want young people and children to stay healthy and well. But we also want schools and early learning centres to stay open so that learning can continue in person, young people can see their teachers and friends and parents and caregivers can continue to go to work.

Early learning centres will also be able to access rapid antigen tests for reassurance testing, so that parents can have confidence in their centre to stay open and for their children to continue to attend. Those centres that opt-in will receive enough tests for staff to do twice-weekly testing.

Staff at specialist schools and special needs units will also be able to access rapid antigen testing for this purpose and will be prioritised for distribution, as will staff at school hostels.

This is a voluntary, short term measure while we get through the peak of the Omicron outbreak. It will be reviewed again in a few weeks' time.

All results must be recorded on My Covid Record and if a person tests positive, they and their household contacts must complete 7 days in isolation. The Close Contact Exemption Scheme remains available if needed, to enable Household Contacts with no symptoms to continue going to work as long as they return a negative rapid antigen test each day.

As our rapid antigen test numbers grow we have more options. People will now be able to access rapid antigen tests through their child's school or early learning centre if they are symptomatic, rather than having to go to a community testing centre.

Schools and early learning centres already have very good protections in place with all staff required to be vaccinated, mask use in Year 4 and up and good ventilation.

In fact portable air cleaners are already being sent to schools to be used in classrooms, staffrooms and other spaces where there is a need to supplement natural ventilation.

State and state-integrated schools have been using their CO2 monitors to help identify where improvements are needed, and the government is ensuring those improvements can be made either through property interventions, and temporarily using portable air cleaners if the fix is going to take longer.

In addition to these targeted approaches, we expect all schools will have at least one portable air cleaner by May they can consider using in areas with higher COVID-19 airborne transmission risk, for example staffrooms, music rooms or cafeterias. Larger schools will receive more, and a further procurement is underway to identify suppliers to meet any future need for CO2 monitors and portable air cleaners from here.

