



**ALL HEADS OF DIVISIONS / DIRECTORATES / CHIEF DIRECTORATES / HEADS OF INSTITUTIONS / REGIONS / DISTRICTS AND SUB-STRUCTURES / NHLs**

**CIRCULAR H 4 /2023**

**MINISTERIAL INSTRUCTION REGARDING COVID-19 SURVEILLANCE TESTING; PCR CONFIRMATION OF POSITIVE RAPID ANTIGEN TESTS AND SEQUENCING TO DETERMINE VARIANT**

This circular should be read in conjunction with **CIRCULAR H 49/2022** "UPDATED COVID TESTING AND SCREENING CRITERIA DURING THE 4TH INTER-WAVE PERIOD".

**PURPOSE:**

To provide updated criteria for COVID-19 testing and screening following the identification of the XBB.1.5 variant in South Africa.

On January 6, 2022, the Stellenbosch University, Network for Genomic Surveillance in South Africa (NGS-SA), identified the first case of the XBB.1.5 COVID-19 variant in South Africa. Genomic surveillance is critical for us to identify and understand the COVID-19 variants in circulation, particularly new and highly transmissible variants. In response, Dr MJ Phaahla, Minister of Health, has issued an instruction to increase testing where COVID-19 is clinically suspected; confirmation PCR testing must be done on all antigen positive cases. The PCR positive samples will be submitted by laboratories for sequencing.

**The WCGH's COVID-19 testing policy (H49/2022) remains unchanged except for the following as per the Ministerial instruction:**

1. Facilities should **increase surveillance** using rapid antigen tests where a **clinical suspicion of COVID-19 infection exists**.
2. **ALL POSITIVE rapid antigen tests must be confirmed by a lab-based PCR test.** The PCR confirmation should be implemented with immediate effect until the end of February 2023. We will review this position at this time and will communicate further should there be a need to continue the PCR confirmatory testing.

IMPORTANT TO NOTE:

- A **new nasopharyngeal swab must be obtained** and sent to the laboratory for PCR confirmation testing.
  - Request must state: **“SARS-CoV-2 PCR test for confirmation purposes”**.
  - **Provide the antigen result** on the laboratory request form.
3. **ALL rapid antigen results (positive and negative)** must be reported on the NHLS Community Screening Application (**CSA portal**).
  4. All public, private and academic laboratories must submit all COVID-19 PCR positive samples for sequencing.

## **WESTERN CAPE GOVERNMENT HEALTH & WELLNESS COVID-19 TESTING CRITERIA**

### **A. COVID TESTING CRITERIA**

- The COVID Testing Criteria remains unchanged as per Circular H49/2022 except for the aforementioned ministerial instructions.
- **The PCR confirmation should be implemented with immediate effect until the end of February 2023.**

#### **A.1. Provide a COVID test for:**

1. People with coronavirus symptoms **AND** who are admitted to hospital.
2. People with coronavirus symptoms **AND** who are at high risk of severe disease (those aged >40 years; those of any age who have one or more of the following co-morbidities: diabetes, obesity, heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, cancer, tuberculosis and poorly controlled HIV).
3. People with coronavirus symptoms **AND** who are awaiting surgery (should be tested 3 days or less before their operation).
4. Health Care Workers and Care Home Workers with coronavirus symptoms.
5. Natural deaths who had coronavirus symptoms.
6. Those who previously tested positive for COVID but have developed new coronavirus symptoms, should only be tested 90 days after their first test (if they meet the criteria above).

**A.2. Do NOT test** those who are **COVID asymptomatic**. This includes health workers, care workers, patients awaiting surgery and patients admitted to hospital.

**A.3.** While the above criteria would cover the vast majority of circumstances, it is accepted that not all possible circumstances can be pro-actively provided for, and hence for unusual circumstances the attending clinician should exercise their clinical judgement around whether to provide a COVID test to a patient, or not, based on the specific clinical picture.

## **B. MANAGING PATIENTS WITH COVID SYMPTOMS WHO WILL NOT BE TESTED:**

All patients who have coronavirus symptoms, but who do not fit the criteria above, and hence will not receive a COVID test, should be informed that they do **NOT need to isolate**. However, they should be advised to:

1. **Wear a mask** whenever interacting with people for the next 5 days
2. **Avoid social gatherings** (3 or more people) for 5 days.
3. **Avoid** being with others **socially** in **indoor spaces** for 5 days.
4. Specifically **avoid** socially interacting with the **elderly** (>60 years) and anyone with **co-morbidities** (diabetes, lung disease, heart disease, kidney disease, cancer, uncontrolled HIV, immunocompromised) for 5 days.

## **C. TYPE OF COVID TEST TO USE**

**C.1. Rapid Antigen testing** is mandated as the **first line test** for criteria 1, 2, 4 and 6 in section A1 above which covers the vast majority of patients.

1. **no further testing is required for Antigen negative test results**, except for point 2 below.
2. **Patients admitted to hospital** and patients whose particular clinical picture suggests a high probability of a false negative antigen test, **should have a follow-on PCR test done**, if the Antigen test is negative.

**C.2. PCR testing** should be done for patients tested for **criteria 3 and 5 in section A1 above**.

## **D. SCREENING**

**D.1. Active screening** (and recording of the screening result) of patients and staff on arrival at health facilities, **should be stopped**.

**D.2.** All patients and escorts should simply be advised, verbally (singly or in groups), via broadcasts and via signage, to report to clinical or administrative staff if they have symptoms suggestive of COVID. These patients are then tested if they meet the criteria above.

**D.3.** All staff should be asked to self-screen before reporting for duty and to obtain a COVID test if they have self-screened positive for COVID.

## **BILLING / COST PER TEST**

- All SARS-CoV-2 tests analysed by NHLS is billed to the single COVID-19 account – 12ZCOV000001.
- The confirmation PCR tests will be billed to account 12ZCOV000001.
- Account 12ZCOV000001 is paid at Head Office level.
- The sequencing of the positive PCR tests is for the cost of the NHLS.

## **RAPID ANTIGEN TEST KITS**

- Rapid antigen test kits can be ordered from Cape Medical Depot (CMD) at zero cost for the facility.
- Unit of measure: 1 x rapid antigen test kit contains 25 individual rapid tests.

**Attached as addendum: Letter from Dr MJ Phaahla, Minister of Health.**

Dr Gavin Reagon [Gavin.Reagon@westerncape.gov.za](mailto:Gavin.Reagon@westerncape.gov.za) or Nicolene Van der Westhuizen [Nicolene.VanderWesthuizen@westerncape.gov.za](mailto:Nicolene.VanderWesthuizen@westerncape.gov.za) can be contacted for further enquiries about this circular.



**DR SAADIQ KARIEM**

**DDG: CHIEF OF OPERATIONS**

**WESTERN CAPE GOVERNMENT: HEALTH AND WELLNESS**

**DATE: 13/01/2023**

## **ADDENDUM :**



MINISTRY  
HEALTH  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

PRETORIA  
Private Bag X399, PRETORIA, 0001, Dr AB Xuma Building, 1112 Voortrekker Rd, Pretoria Townlands 351-JR, Pretoria, 0187 Tel: (012) 395 8000 Fax: (012) 395 9165  
CAPE TOWN  
Private Bag X9070, CAPE TOWN, 8000, Room 413, 120 Plein Street, CAPE TOWN, 8000 Tel: (021) 465 7407/8 Fax: (021) 465 1575

To: Provincial Departments of Health, Private Laboratories and Academic Laboratories

### **RE: INSTRUCTION TO ALL PUBLIC, PRIVATE AND ACADEMIC LABORATORIES TO SUBMIT ALL COVID-19 PCR POSITIVE SAMPLES FOR SEQUENCING IN A TIMELY MANNER TO ENHANCE SURVEILLANCE IN LIGHT OF REDUCED RESTRICTIONS IN CHINA**

Following the abandonment of the zero-COVID policy in China, Chinese authorities will allow Chinese nationals to travel more easily abroad from 8 January 2023. There are fears that the end of almost three years of strict measures in the country of 1.4 billion people could result in the spread of the disease and possible introduction of a new variant to the rest of the world in light of the surge in infections. This coupled with a lack of adequate information from China, particularly on the strains circulating in the country, has resulted in several countries instituting travel restrictions for travellers through and from China.

The reduction in COVID-19 restrictions in China and resumption of travel through and from China is not anticipated to pose a significant threat to South Africa in terms of imported cases from China. Therefore, we are recommending that South Africa should not implement travel restrictions. South Africa has very high levels of immunity and ongoing circulation of COVID-19 (albeit at low testing rates) as well as low case, hospitalisation and death rates. Although it is plausible that a new variant may emerge in China, it is deemed unlikely that a more severe or substantial immune escape variant will represent a substantial threat to South Africa.

However, we as South Africa must increase vigilance for the next 30-day period through increased testing for COVID-19 where clinical suspicion exists. For this purpose, all Provincial Health Departments must:

1. Increase surveillance through use of antigen testing and PCR testing where appropriate. Provincial Departments must conduct a confirmatory PCR test for all positive antigen tests.
2. All individuals who test positive with antigen testing for COVID-19 must have a confirmatory PCR test and all antigen test results, both negative and positive, must be timeously reported on the NHLS Community Screening Application (CSA).

3. All public, private and academic laboratories must submit all COVID-19 PCR positive samples for sequencing in a timely manner.

In support of these recommendations, the NHLS will make 500 000 antigen tests freely available to the national and provincial departments of health to increase testing and to better determine community positivity rates.

Sincerely



**Dr M.J PHAAHLA (MP)**  
**MINISTER OF HEALTH**

DATE: 06/01/2023