



1. Position

The RACGP supports free access to rapid antigen tests through multiple distribution points targeting those most at risk of severe COVID-19 disease and most likely to spread COVID in the community. However, in a position of constrained resources, priority should be given to manage the risk of COVID infection in vulnerable patients and spread of the virus in the community.

In a constrained resource situation, the RACGP supports:

- general practice access to the government stockpile of rapid antigen tests to enable testing as part of management of symptomatic and high-risk individuals, and those with COVID-19 unable to access polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing when required
- full-priced rapid antigen tests being available at retail outlets including supermarkets
- free access to rapid antigen tests for target groups such as those with high risk factors, those where the risk of transmission is high and those who cannot be vaccinated.

2. Background

Rapid antigen self-tests are now available to the Australian public and may help detect COVID-19 in the community and prevent further spread. They are a faster way to test for COVID-19 than traditional PCR tests and can usually provide a result within 20 minutes. They do not replace a PCR test. PCR tests are still the most accurate and reliable test to detect and diagnose COVID-19. However, in an endemic COVID environment, rapid antigen tests play a role in detection of COVID in symptomatic patients, especially those at high risk and in those most likely to spread COVID in the community.

3. Discussion

With PCR testing under pressure to meet demand, rapid antigen tests can play an important role in protecting the health system and the community. Without access to PCR testing, those who are COVID-positive cannot access pathways of clinical care for COVID in the community including remote monitoring of symptoms and escalation if there is further clinical deterioration. Without a positive COVID diagnosis, patients also cannot access the COVID-19 treatment sotrovimab. Furthermore, their close contacts are at risk of spreading COVID further as they are not aware that they are at risk.

Delays in accessing PCR testing, as well as delays in receiving the results, mean that rapid antigen tests need to be accessible to all Australians, but particularly those at higher risk or in specific circumstances, as well as those who can spread COVID rapidly and to significant numbers of people.

Providing free access to rapid antigen tests would particularly benefit those with high risk factors, those where the risk of transmission is high and those who cannot be vaccinated.

General practitioners (GPs) are best placed to support the assessment of individual health conditions and specific circumstances to determine the clinical need for access to no cost or subsidised rapid antigen tests. However, specific locations and venues should also be targeted with freely available rapid antigen tests to manage high-risk populations.

The RACGP calls on state and federal governments to:

- provide general practice with a stock of rapid antigen tests for patients with clinical indications and risk factors
- provide high-risk locations such as supported accommodation and residential aged care facilities with a stock of rapid antigen tests
- provide free access to rapid antigen tests for all Australians, supply permitting, prioritising target populations during supply constraint.

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