

9 February 2022

s 9(2)(a)

By email: s 9(2)(a)
Ref: H202117954

Tēnā koe s 9(2)(a)

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) on 18 December 2021 for information regarding COVID-19. Each part of your request is responded to below.

- 1. I have checked the websites that you have given me, however I cannot find any links to scientific articles that relate to the Delta variant and the evidence that you talk about that shows "the vaccine greatly reduces the risk of contracting COVID-19 and that it greatly reduces the likelihood of getting very unwell and dying. Can you please provide me the scientific evidence that shows that the vaccine reduces the risk of Delta, as this is the virus we are now dealing with. There is so much new information out there, I feel like the MOH website has very old information still.*

The Ministry regularly updates its website with new information regarding the variants. This can be found under the *Variants Update* section at:

www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/19_january_2022_-_variants_update_0.pdf. Likewise, chapter 5 of the New Zealand Immunisation Handbook (www.health.govt.nz/our-work/immunisation-handbook-2020/5-coronavirus-disease-covid-19) includes references to both the Delta and Omicron variants. The handbook is thoroughly referenced and links to the latest peer reviewed scientific literature.

- 2. Regarding our concerns about the safety and efficiency of the vaccine, we have consulted with suitable medical practitioners (GP and cardiologists), however as you know the criteria for exemptions is small and does not include recent heart attacks, so their hands are tied. Is there a board of people that review these exemptions that I could write to? Do the criteria get reviewed?*

The Ministry has robust systems and processes in place to assess Temporary Medical Exemptions (TME). Applications are assessed against the Temporary Medical Exemption criteria that can be found at: www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/vaccine-temporary-medical-exemption-30nov21.pdf.

The Temporary Medical Exemption Panel includes a clinical immunologist and allergist, consultant neurologist, clinical pharmacologist and endocrinologist, and those with primary health care expertise. The panel also consults with external experts as required. Please note, the Terms of Reference require the panel to undertake a review once every two

months. During the review, the Panel look at new clinical evidence and assess whether any changes to the clinical criteria are required.

Exemption applications are submitted by a person's doctor or other healthcare professional. The Panel considers each application on its merits and in light of supporting medical evidence. Once the Panel has considered the application, they make a recommendation to the Director-General of Health.

- 3. Do you have any scientific references that can prove that the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines are safe for those that have had heart attacks recently and that are safe with other medication? I have not been able to find any, but am sure you have some links that you could send me.*

The Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines have been thoroughly assessed for safety for people with underlying health conditions. You are strongly encouraged to get vaccinated if you have a condition like cancer, diabetes, kidney disease or heart disease. This is because if you catch COVID-19, you are more likely to get seriously ill and end up in hospital. You cannot get the Pfizer vaccine if you have had a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to an ingredient in the vaccine.

Further information about vaccine advice about if you have a health condition is available at: covid19.govt.nz/covid-19-vaccines/get-the-facts-about-covid-19-vaccination/vaccine-advice-if-you-have-a-health-condition/.

If you have any questions or concerns, talk to your doctor before getting vaccinated.

- 4. I was also surprised when I called your COVID helpline and while I was waiting for someone to answer they said there were no serious side effects from the vaccine, I asked the person that answered the call about this and they said they were not aware of any serious adverse effects. This is not correct information and should be changed as the Medsafe data sheet has a few warnings and the Medsafe Adverse Reaction Reports tells a different story. Can you please change this?*

Your feedback about the COVID-19 Helpline has been passed onto the Helpline team and Medsafe.

- 5. Is there somewhere on the MOH website that advises people what they can do to reduce the COVID symptoms when at home, so they do not get hospitalized? There are many international doctors that have treated patients successfully and by now there should be some advice for the public regarding how they can better look after themselves. I have asked my GP and they do not have any advice or protocols in place to treat people early. If you are really concerned about people's health, there should now be some advice for GP's regarding early treatment as we see from international literature that early treatment saves lives.*

Currently if someone tests positive to COVID-19 a health professional will contact them and provide detailed and individualised advice. There is also information on the Ministry's website on what someone could expect once they test positive and provided on websites such as Health Navigator. This includes specific advice for people self-isolating in temporary accommodation, holiday home and apartments. This information is available at:

- health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/advice-people-covid-19
- www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/c/covid-19-positive-managing-your-symptoms/

General practitioners (GPs) have detailed information available for managing COVID-19 in patients through Health Pathways, an online resource used by clinicians to guide clinical care for a range of conditions. GPs commonly manage viral infections and should be able to provide appropriate advice for symptomatic management for an individual.

The Ministry is actively looking at the use of therapeutics for cases of COVID-19 within hospital and community settings. Not only is it necessary to gather the required evidence on their use and benefits, but any therapeutics also require Medsafe approval and funding to be determined by Pharmac.

6. There are hundreds of studies that have looked at natural immunity as being effective against COVID. If someone has had COVID why can they not get an exemption as they are now immune to covid? It seems that literature shows that once someone has had COVID they cannot get it again, if I am wrong please can you send me the literature to show this is not the case.

With regard to those who have already had COVID-19, antibody (often referred to as serology) tests look for antibodies in the blood. COVID-19 antibody tests can help identify people who may have been infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus or have recovered from a COVID-19 infection.

At this time, researchers do not know whether the presence of antibodies means that you are immune to COVID-19; or if you are immune, how long it will last.

In people who have received a COVID-19 vaccination, antibody testing is not recommended to determine whether you are immune or protected from COVID-19. Vaccination remains the safest way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19 infection. If you are unsure, please discuss with your healthcare professional the risk-benefit assessment for receiving a COVID-19 vaccine.

The Ministry continues to assess this question and is in discussion with the COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group (CV TAG) to determine if a change is appropriate that should consider natural infection alongside any decision around immunity from vaccination

While other countries and the World Health Organization (WHO) have made statements about immunity from natural infection, the Ministry has not revised its position on this topic and continues to keep it under open review. At this point, given very few people in New Zealand have had COVID-19, such that an adjustment in this position would not be appropriate.

Under section 28(3) of the Act, you have the right to ask the Ombudsman to review any decisions made under this request. The Ombudsman may be contacted by email at: info@ombudsman.parliament.nz or by calling 0800 802 602.

Please note that this response, with your personal details removed, may be published on the Ministry website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gill Hall". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Gill Hall
Group Manager
COVID-19 Science and Insights