



## Response to the COVID-19 pandemic – Securing access to rapid antigen tests (RATs)

The Australian Government is investing more than \$1.6 billion to ensure equitable access to rapid antigen tests (RATs) to help detect COVID-19 and provide reassurance to Australians and their families as we continue to live with COVID.

The community spread of COVID-19, particularly the Omicron variant, and the easing of many pandemic-related restrictions has increased the need for RATs.

This investment supports a number of measures.

- The COVID-19 Rapid Test Concessional Access (CRTCA) Program which commenced on 24 January 2022 and provided support for concession card holders to access 10 RATs from participating community pharmacies. This investment also supports a three-month extension of the program to 31 July 2022, providing access to an additional 10 RATs each over this period. This program is jointly funded 50:50 with the states and territories.
- Securing RATs for residential aged care facilities (RACFs), Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS), general practice-led respiratory clinics (GPRCs), and Supported Independent Living (SIL) residential disability care. This funding helped secure RAT supplies for a strategic reserve within the National Medical Stockpile (NMS).
- Supplying RATs for school children and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). This program offers 50% reimbursement for state and territory government costs to provide two RATs per week over four weeks for COVID-19 surveillance testing of students, teachers and staff.

The Australian Government's investment in RATs has secured significant supplies to ensure frontline health and care sectors can access these tests to improve protection for vulnerable Australians.

More than 71.6 million RATs have been made available across all Department of Health delivery channels, including:

- 27.4 million distributed to aged care
- 23.5 million accessed through pharmacies, and
- 19.7 million distributed through all other channels.

The provision of RATs further supports the Australian Government's significant and ongoing investment in COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing and pathology to diagnose COVID-19 positive cases.

### **Why is this important?**

RATs play an increasingly important role in detecting the virus, managing public health and safety, protecting vulnerable Australians and minimising disruptions to daily life, particularly as we live with COVID-19.

RATs can indicate a positive COVID-19 case in less than 15 minutes and have been an important additional COVID-19 detection and surveillance measure, particularly in frontline health settings, in schools and businesses to ensure the health and safety of patients, vulnerable people, children, workers and the public.

People who depend on these services can have confidence that residents, staff, patients, students and visitors can all be screened for COVID-19 to detect cases early, take necessary infection prevention and control measures, alert close contacts, and possibly prevent wide-spread outbreaks.

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring all citizens have equitable access to COVID-19 tests as Australia continues to live with COVID-19.

Extending the support for concession card holders to access RATs through participating community pharmacies ensures that low or limited income is not a barrier to accessibility of the tests.

Supporting primary care providers through a new Medicare Benefits Schedule item to offer medically supervised RAT screening to patients where clinically appropriate, increases access to this important detection method. It also helps improve the protection for clinicians and other patients from COVID-19 where an infection may previously have gone undetected.

RATs provide reassurance that Australians can go about their daily activities with confidence in their safety. They also provide an important screening tool to preserve public health, helping detect COVID-19 cases and prompting those with the virus to isolate to protect their friends, family and community.

### **Who will benefit?**

All Australians benefit from the COVID-19 disease surveillance provided through RAT screening, and this is especially important for those working in health care settings with vulnerable people.

The Australian Government has secured supplies of RATs for RACFs, ACCHS, SIL residential disability care, GP-led respiratory clinics, and has established a strategic reserve in case of emergency.

Concession card holders will also benefit from continued access to free RATs through their local participating community pharmacy. The extension of the program until 31 July 2022 will mean concession card holders can access an additional 10 tests, for a maximum of 20 free RATs.

Australian school students, children in childcare, teachers and staff will also benefit from the provision of RATs to allow surveillance screening in schools and ECECs.

Primary care providers will also benefit from a new MBS item for medically supervised RATs, which will improve access to RAT screening and ensure the time taken for a RAT result is properly compensated.

More than 25.3 million RATs have been deployed to all 2700 Residential Aged Care facilities since August 2021.

### **How much will this cost?**

The Australian Government is investing \$1.6 billion over two years, 2021–22 to 2022–23.