



Extension of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) Laboratory Testing Item

Last updated: 20 December 2021

- The Australian Government has extended the temporary Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items 69479 and 69480 for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing for COVID-19 from 1 January 2022 until 30 June 2022.
- From 1 January 2022, the MBS item (69501) for COVID-19 screening of asymptomatic essential workers will cease.
- A reduced schedule fee for MBS items 69479 and 69480 will apply from 1 January 2022, reflecting a reduction in the cost of providing COVID-19 tests.
- A request from a medical or nurse practitioner is a requirement for MBS items 69479 and 69480. Rebates must only be claimed where a patient's treating practitioner determines that the test is necessary for the clinical management of their patient.
- All COVID-19 PCR tests undertaken for public health screening purposes, for example, asymptomatic screening, workplace testing, or testing for travel interstate, will continue to be provided free-of-charge through state and territory public health testing sites. Public health testing sites can be found via the relevant state and territory health department websites.
- From 1 January 2022, COVID-19 tests performed for patients admitted in-hospital with private health insurance coverage may be charged at a fee higher than the MBS rebate. To be eligible for an MBS rebate, pathology providers will only be permitted to charge no more than 100 per cent of the MBS fee. Patients will continue to not incur out-of-pocket expenses, with private health insurers to cover the gap between the Medicare rebate and the fee charged.
- Out-of-hospital claims for MBS items 69479 and 69480 in any other settings must be directly billed to Medicare and cannot incur any additional cost over the MBS rebate (i.e. the services must be bulk-billed).

What are the changes?

On 3 December 2021, the Australian Government announced the extension of the following temporary COVID-19 pathology items on the MBS to 30 June 2022:

- MBS item 69479, at a schedule fee of \$42.50 for COVID-19 laboratory testing provided from 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2022, if:
 - the person is a private patient in a public hospital; or
 - the person receives the service from a public pathology laboratory.
- MBS item 69480, at a schedule fee of \$85.00 for COVID-19 laboratory testing from 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2022, if the service is not covered by item 69479 (for example, where the service is provided in a private hospital or by a private pathology laboratory).



MBS Item	Current MBS schedule fee			New MBS schedule fee from 1 January 2022		
	100% fee	85% benefit	75% benefit	100% fee	85% benefit	75% benefit
69479	\$50.00	\$42.50	\$35.00	\$42.50	\$36.15	\$31.90
69480	\$100.00	\$85.00	\$75.00	\$85.00	\$72.25	\$63.75

The Australian Government also announced the following changes commencing 1 January 2022:

- The cessation of MBS item 69501, for COVID-19 laboratory testing provided for testing of asymptomatic Victorian aged care workers, interstate drivers of heavy vehicles, and interstate rail crew members
- To permit private in-hospital patients to be charged above the MBS rebate for a COVID-19 test, to a maximum amount equal to the MBS schedule fee, allowing private health insurers to cover the difference in cost, aligning with standard private health insurance arrangements.

A fundamental principle remains that no costs will be imposed on any individual requiring a COVID-19 PCR test, including necessary testing associated with relevant state and territory public health responses and border crossings.

Why are the changes being made?

The extension of MBS items 69479 and 69480 until 30 June 2022 will ensure the continued health and safety of Australians. The continuation of these items will guarantee the ongoing accessibility to laboratory testing of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus which causes COVID-19) and adequate capacity to reliably diagnose COVID-19 in patients who present to their medical or nurse practitioner and inform their clinical management.

The reduction in schedule fees reflects a reduction in the cost associated with providing COVID-19 tests.

MBS item 69501 was introduced to support the Victorian aged care sector during the Victorian COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 and was later expanded to include asymptomatic interstate truck drivers and rail crew given concerns of COVID-19 transmission between states and territories.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 PCR testing undertaken for public health screening purposes, for example, asymptomatic screening or workplace testing, has been appropriately funded through the National Partnership on COVID-19 Response (the Partnership). Under the Partnership, COVID-19 testing is provided by state and territory government run public health testing sites, with the support of the Australian Government which funds 50 per cent of the costs of public health testing facilities in all state and territory jurisdictions.

On cessation of MBS item 69501, COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic essential workers will continue to be provided by state and territory governments under the Partnership. Under the Partnership, all governments have committed to providing COVID-19 pathology testing to people in Australia free-of-charge, including Victorian aged care, freight, and transport workers.

For patients admitted in-hospital, pathology providers will be allowed to charge for COVID-19 PCR tests at a fee higher than the MBS rebate, to a maximal amount equal to 100 per cent of the MBS fee. In this circumstance, Medicare will reimburse 75 per cent of the schedule fee with private health insurers covering the remaining 25 per



cent for their insured customers. This change reflects the return to standard private patient in-hospital arrangements for pathology services, where the private health insurer contributes to the cost of the service for their insured patients.

What does this mean for providers/referrers/other stakeholders?

The extension of the temporary COVID-19 pathology items on the MBS until 30 June 2022 will allow continued support for public and private pathology providers in providing testing for SARS-CoV-2.

A request from a medical or nurse practitioner is a requirement for MBS items 69479 and 69480. In accordance with the *Health Insurance Act 1973*, rebates must only be claimed where a patient's treating practitioner determines that the test is necessary for the clinical management of their patient.

The temporary COVID-19 pathology items are exempt from episode coning arrangements. Non-Public Health Laboratory Network (PHLN) laboratories are still required to participate in a relevant external Quality Assurance Program for testing methods to provide testing for SARS-CoV-2 under item 69480.

How will these changes affect patients?

The extension of MBS items 69479 and 69480 until 30 June 2022 will allow Medicare eligible patients with a request from medical or nurse practitioner to continue to access COVID-19 testing with no out-of-pocket cost. The requirements for patients to access these services have not changed.

Who was consulted on the changes?

The extension of the temporary COVID-19 pathology items on the MBS items has been made in line with advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), as well as consultation feedback from the Royal College of Pathologists Australasia (RCPA), Public Pathology Australia, and Australian Pathology.

How will the changes be monitored and reviewed?

The COVID-19 testing items are scheduled to be listed until 30 June 2022. Disease progression in the community and advice from the AHPPC will inform whether they are required beyond this time.

Where can I find more information?

If you have a query relating to the interpretation of the MBS, you should email askMBS@health.gov.au. Subscribe to '[News for Health Professionals](#)' on the Services Australia website to receive regular news highlights:.

If you are seeking advice in relation to Medicare billing, claiming, payments, or provider numbers, please visit the Health Professionals page on the Services Australia website or contact their Provider Enquiry Line – 13 21 50.

This sheet is current as of the Last updated date shown above, and does not account for MBS changes since that date.