



Extension of temporary pathology items for Microbiology Tests for SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19)

Last updated: 7 October 2020

- The Australian Government will extend the listing of the temporary dedicated Medicare bulk-billed pathology test items for COVID-19 for a further six months, to 31 March 2021.
- A request from a Medical Practitioner continues to be required for Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) Items 69479 and 69480. These items must only be claimed where a Medical Practitioner determines that the test is medically necessary for the treatment of a patient. Items 69479 and 69480 are not available for the purposes of satisfying international travel requirements or conditions of employment.
- From 22 September 2020, interstate rail crew will be able to access bulk-billed COVID-19 pathology testing through the essential workers MBS Item 69501, without the need for a request from a Medical Practitioner.

What are the changes?

The Australian Government is extending the listing of the following temporary Medicare bulk-billed pathology test items for COVID-19 until 31 March 2021:

- Item 69479: COVID-19 microbiology test undertaken for a private patient in a recognised (public) hospital or by a prescribed laboratory, with a schedule fee of \$50.00.
- Item 69480: COVID-19 microbiology test for any other patient undertaken in a private laboratory, with a schedule fee of \$100.00.
- Item 69501: COVID-19 microbiology test for essential workers, including staff of residential and in-home aged care providers in Victoria and interstate freight workers, with a schedule fee of \$110.00.

From 22 September 2020, persons employed, hired, retained or contracted to travel interstate as a rail crew members will be able to access the essential workers Item 69501.

Why are the changes being made?

The temporary MBS Items 69479, 69480 and 69501 were scheduled to be listed until 30 September 2020. The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) has considered the current COVID-19 situation and advised there is a continued need for the testing items under the MBS until 31 March 2021.

Extending support for COVID-19 testing through the MBS items will maintain Australia's capacity to detect and track the spread of the disease, support the easing of restrictions and minimise the economic consequences of the pandemic.



Under the *Freight Movement Code for the Domestic Border Controls* (the Code) agreed by National Cabinet, jurisdictions have agreed to ensure heavy vehicle drivers, rail crew and support workers are able to access free COVID-19 tests in states and territories where border controls and mandatory testing requirements apply. Previously, the essential workers Item 69501 had only been available to people working in aged care services in Victoria and people travelling interstate as heavy vehicle drivers. To align with the Code, and to support the availability of COVID-19 testing for interstate freight workers, from 22 September 2020, interstate rail crew will be eligible to access the essential workers item 69501.

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

MBS Items 69479, 69480 and 69501 must continue to be bulk-billed.

Providers may submit claims for the testing of interstate rail workers under Item 69501 to Services Australia from 22 September 2020.

The following requirements and conditions will continue to apply for Items 69479 and 69480:

- Items 69479 and 69480 will not be subject to episode coning arrangements.
- The test requires a request from a Medical Practitioner. The test is able to be requested by any treating Medical Practitioner.
- Items 69479 and 69480 must only be claimed where a Medical Practitioner determines that the test is medically necessary for the treatment of a patient. The items are not to be used for the purposes of satisfying international travel requirements or conditions of employment.
- Accredited pathology laboratories providing or planning to provide clinical diagnostic testing and reporting for SARS-CoV-2 (MBS Item 69480 and 69479) must be enrolled and participate in a relevant External Quality Assurance Program for testing methods. The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) Quality Assurance Programs offers a SARS-CoV-2 Quality Assurance Program. Further details can be found at the [RCPA website](#).

The following requirements and conditions will continue to apply for Item 69501:

- The test does not require a request from a Medical Practitioner.
- Eligible workers may access the service on a voluntary basis by visiting an Approved Pathology Collection Centre operated by a private pathology provider.
- The item may not be claimed with other pathology items, including patient episode initiation fees and bulk-billing incentives. The item fee includes the value of a patient episode initiation fee equivalent to MBS Item 73928 (fee of \$5.95) and bulk billing incentive equivalent to MBS Item 74995 (fee of \$4.00).
- Testing services under the item can only be provided by private sector pathology providers and are not available to hospital in-patients.
- The item requires reporting of test results to all appropriate authorities in accordance with the relevant state or territory legislation or regulations and patients, within 24 hours of receipt of the specimen.



In addition, it is recommended that laboratories:

- Access and utilise positive control material provided by a state or territory reference laboratory (usually a Public Health Laboratory Network (PHLN) laboratory); and
- Arrange for parallel testing to be conducted by a PHLN laboratory to validate the results. This means referring all positive samples for confirmatory testing until a level of confidence is reached, determined by the jurisdictional PHLN laboratory; referring a subset of negative samples where a strong clinical or epidemiological suspicion exists; and referring all indeterminate samples for confirmatory testing.

How will these changes affect patients?

Medicare eligible patients will continue to have access to bulk-billed COVID-19 tests through the MBS.

Essential workers in the Victorian aged care sector and interstate freight industry will continue to be able to access bulk-billed COVID-19 tests under Medicare without requiring a request from a Medical Practitioner and do not need to be suffering symptoms (Item 69501).

Who was consulted on the changes?

The Department of Health has been consulting with the pathology sector on an ongoing basis on COVID-19 testing through the MBS. The Australian Government also consulted with state and territory governments on the continuation of the items, through the AHPPC and National Cabinet.

How will the changes be monitored and reviewed?

Items 69479, 69480 and 69501 are scheduled to be listed until 31 March 2021. Disease progression in the community and advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee will determine whether the items are required for a longer time.

Where can I find more information?

The full item descriptor(s) and information on other changes to the MBS can be found on the [MBS Online website](#). You can also subscribe to future MBS updates by visiting [MBS Online](#) and clicking 'Subscribe'.

The Department of Health provides an email advice service for providers seeking advice on interpretation of the MBS items and rules and the Health Insurance Act and associated regulations. If you have a query relating exclusively to interpretation of the Schedule, you should email askMBS@health.gov.au.

Subscribe to '[News for Health Professionals](#)' on the Services Australia website and you will receive regular news highlights.

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

The data file for software vendors is expected to become available on 18 September 2020 and can be accessed via the MBS Online website under the [Downloads](#) page.



Please note that the information provided is a general guide only. It is ultimately the responsibility of treating practitioners to use their professional judgment to determine the most clinically appropriate services to provide, and then to ensure that any services billed to Medicare fully meet the eligibility requirements outlined in the legislation. This sheet is current as of the Last updated date shown above, and does not account for MBS changes since that date.