

COVID-19

Information on critical health services in the health and disability system

28 January 2022

All health and disability services and their workers can continue to operate under the COVID-19 Protection Framework, also known as the 'traffic light' system. This remains true at all levels, Green, Orange and Red.

If the community spread of Omicron causes significant disruptions to services, we have defined critical health services that will be required to ensure their critical workers follow guidance at each phase of the response to Omicron (Stamp it Out, Flatten the Curve and Manage it). This guidance will be in relation to periods of self-isolation and Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs). Where operational changes need to be made, these will only apply to critical workers where face-to-face service delivery is required.

Definition of critical worker in the context of the Omicron Response

Within the health and disability settings, a critical worker is defined as someone who provides a critical health service.

Critical worker means a role identified by a business that:

- requires a person with particular skills; and
- must be performed in person at the workplace; and
- must continue to be performed to:
 - prevent an immediate risk of death or serious injury to a person or animal; or
 - prevent serious harm (social, economic or physical) to significant numbers in the community.

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Assumptions for defining critical health services

1. The list of critical health services has been updated to reflect New Zealand's COVID-19 Protection Framework, which has replaced the 'Alert Level' system.
2. If disruptions are caused by Omicron and operational changes need to be made, the distinction between critical and non-critical health and disability services (and the implications of these definitions) are likely to be in place for 2-3 months. The list will be revised from time to time where appropriate and necessary.

Critical health services criteria

Critical services in the health system are those that meet one or more of the following five criteria:

1. A health and disability service that provides direct, hands-on care and support that maintain a person's necessities of life.
2. A health and disability service that ensures the safety of the critical workforce.
3. Disability Support Services (DSS) and Aged Care services, including Home and Community Support Services (HCSS), that support high-risk and vulnerable client groups.
4. Crisis support for people who feel unwell or are unsafe (eg, funded helplines, refuges and family violence services, sexual violence crisis services).
5. A health and disability service that enables the delivery of equitable care to those people most at risk of harm.

Services are prioritised to those people most at risk of harm if those services were not provided. Each provider delivering these services must immediately identify those people most at risk.

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Key Questions and Answers

1. What is the definition of health services that would be considered critical?

Any entity or worker providing a critical health service (as defined above) is considered critical. Critical services will continue to provide the basic necessities of life for everyone in New Zealand.

2. What are some examples of health services that would be considered critical?

Please see Appendix 1 of this document for the list of health and disability services currently considered critical. This list is not exhaustive and agencies can be added to the list if they contact the Ministry of Health and an assessment by the Ministry concludes that they are indeed critical. An assessment can be requested by emailing info@healthworkforce.govt.nz.

3. Are maternity workers considered critical?

There are around 1,400 Lead Maternity Carers, GPs, obstetricians, and other maternity workers who are employed under section 88 of the NZ Public Health and Disability Act 2000. The Ministry of Health consider all of these workers, who help mothers give birth, to be critical.

If the mother of a baby happens to have contracted COVID-19, the baby must be born in a hospital to ensure appropriate safety precautions are in place to prevent its spread.

4. Are there any health, disability, or aged care support services that would be excluded from the definition of critical services?

Broadly speaking, all health-related services that are not related to maintaining the necessities of life are excluded.

However, there will also be health and disability services that are normally considered to be 'non-critical' that may be considered critical under certain (usually time-limited) circumstances, such as when the Ministry of Health has to change their operational response to address the possible disruptions due to Omicron. Please note that all health services continue under Red settings. Critical health services are a subset of the health workforce that meet the criteria of critical workers and therefore require access to RATs and other measures to ensure they can continue in their roles in an Omicron outbreak.

Household management services

Home support services for older people or people with disabilities would be considered critical if they are needed to prevent an immediate risk of death or serious injury to a person or prevent serious harm. For example, most people could cope adequately without their home being vacuumed for a few weeks. However, if a person's health or disability means that they cannot keep their house clean enough to stay healthy, the support they receive to do so would be considered critical.

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Social connection services

All services provided in the health and disability system that might be considered related to socialising, rather than health, would be excluded from the definition of 'critical'. For example, volunteers taking the elderly for a drive is good for mental health, but most people can remain healthy for a few weeks without this close contact. Similarly, visiting aged care homes for the purposes of doing arts and crafts to raise morale would not be considered a critical service.

5. Are students who are providing health and disability services considered to be providing critical services?

Students undertaking a placement as part of completing their academic programme may start or continue in that placement only in accordance with COVID-19 Protection Framework settings. Students performing critical services defined in this document must comply with the Framework settings and/or conditions that apply to the setting where the student is placed.

6. How can people get repeat prescriptions?

Your doctor will have ways to get a prescription in place under all conditions, whether they are operating face-to-face or remotely. Please ring your doctor for further information.

7. How will enforcement officers know whether a health or disability service worker is considered 'critical' or not?

Those services explicitly listed in Appendix 1 are automatically considered critical. Workers that can demonstrate they work in one of those services should be considered critical workers.

Appendix 1: List of critical health services (alphabetically)

If the community spread of Omicron causes significant disruptions to services, we have defined critical health services that will be required to follow guidance for critical workers at each phase of the response to Omicron (Stamp it Out, Flatten the Curve and Manage it). This guidance will be in relation to periods of self-isolation and Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs). Where operational changes need to be made, guidance will only apply to critical workers where face-to-face service delivery is required.

The Ministry of Health considers the following services to be critical. Any worker providing a critical health or disability service is considered a critical worker. Also, any workers involved in the COVID-19 response are also considered critical. If the following services can be provided virtually, rather than in-person, that is encouraged and will help prevent the spread of the virus.

- Acute care services
- Aged care services
- Ambulance services (including air ambulances)
- Caregivers providing care at individuals homes
- Care facilities (eg, rest homes / retirement villages)
- Community care services
- Cemeteries
- Crematoria
- Disability Support Services (including equipment and modification services)
- District Health Boards (and all their facilities) including services subcontracted for urgent care by a DHB
- Funeral homes and services
- General practice services
- Health equipment producers
- Health Quality and Safety Commission
- Home and Community Support Services (if they are needed to prevent an immediate risk of death or serious injury to a person or prevent serious harm)
- Homecare Medical services
- Iwi / Māori health providers
- Kaiāwhina services
- Maternity services
- Medical Laboratory services
- Medicine suppliers
- Mortuary services
- Needs Assessment Service Coordinators (NASCs)
- Needle exchange
- NZ Blood Service
- Medical laboratories
- Mental health and addiction services
- Pacific health services
- Paramedic services
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) suppliers
- Pharmaceutical services
- Pharmacist
- Primary care clinics (including private Allied Health providers)
- Public Health Units
- Telehealth services
- Whānau ora services

Not being on the list above does not necessarily mean a service is considered non-critical. It may simply not have been considered by the Ministry of Health yet. If your service is not on the list but you believe it should be, you should write to the Ministry of Health at info@healthworkforce.govt.nz and ask for a letter confirming your organisation is a critical service.