

28 October 2021

Ben.

By email: fyi-request-16936-1e93c74a@requests.fyi.org.nz

Ref: H202113338

Tēnā koe Ben

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) on 29 September 2021 for information related to COVID-19 PCR testing. You requested specifically:

“Could you please let me know if any studies have been done and if so, what was the conclusion of the effects that ongoing regular PCR tests have on an individual”

Please note, the Ministry does not conduct scientific research or surveys and has not conducted studies on this topic. As such, the information requested is refused under section 18(g) of the Act as the information is not held by the Ministry and there are no grounds for believing it is held by any other agency subject to the Act. However, you may find the published literature regarding adverse events associated with the use of nasopharyngeal swabs useful.

A 2021 review of literature looking at adverse events associated with nasopharyngeal swabs found that the most common adverse event was epistaxis (nosebleed). The majority of the nose bleeds were mild and resolved without any intervention. There were nine reported cases where the swab broke off and was retained in the nasal cavity. All were removed successfully (except one which was assumed to have been swallowed). There were three reported cases of a cerebrospinal fluid leak after a nasopharyngeal swab with two having surgical repair and one spontaneously resolved. This review is available at: www.jim.bmj.com/content/jim/early/2021/08/03/jim-2021-001962.full.pdf.

Another case series of 4,876 consecutive swabs at one hospital found again that nosebleed was the most common side effect and that only 8 individuals (0.16%) required ENT evaluation. Three other patients had swabs broken off in the nasal cavity and needed removal in two cases. One patient, with diabetes and low white blood cells, developed a septal abscess and another with some anatomical problem needed surgical intervention for a bleeding artery. All complications were successfully treated with no reported adverse outcomes or further morbidity. This case series is available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7553130/pdf/main.

A 2020 article comparing two types of swabs in 176 employees found that nosebleed was the most common adverse event (in about 7%) and was usually mild and self-limited although one person did go to an emergency department for treatment. Other adverse effects were also minor and included nasal discomfort (6%), headache (4%), earache (3%), and rhinorrhea (runny nose, 3%), which typically lasted hours to a day. This article is available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7308627/.

One study found 3 adverse events from 11,476 deep nasal and throat swabs in 3,083 individuals from May to August 2020 in Germany. This equates to 0.026 %. In two people, the swab broke off during swabbing and the other person had a spontaneous dislocation of their left temporomandibular joint when opening their mouth for the throat swab. This study is available at: www.erj.ersjournals.com/content/early/2020/11/26/13993003.04004-2020.

There are hundreds of thousands of nasopharyngeal swabs completed in New Zealand, with the most common adverse events usually mild and self-limiting. More serious adverse events are rare and in the published reports, treated successfully with no ongoing issues.

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 of Health website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Aoife', written in a cursive style.

Aoife Kenny
Chief Advisor Public Health
COVID-19 Health System Response