

28 February 2024

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Tēnā koe

**Your request for official information, reference: HNZ00034470**

Thank you for your email on 12 December 2023, asking Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora for the following under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act):

*Thank you for your OIA response HNZ00031073 relating to Covid deaths.*

*Are you referring in this answer to Covid deaths in the first wave of Covid (delta variant) only, or to deaths in the first and second waves (delta and omicron)? Are these categories of death what you use now?*

*In response to my question: "What is the difference between "Covid-19 as underlying" and "Covid-19 as contributory"?"*

*You said regarding the category "underlying cause of death":  
"An underlying cause of death is defined as the disease or condition that initiated the train of events leading directly to death".*

*With Covid, what are the "trains of events" that lead to death? (eg cough, shortness of breath, etc). In other words, by what physical mechanisms does Covid cause death?  
What are the hospital treatments for people with Covid "as an underlying cause", that is, presumably, when Covid is their main or only illness?*

*Have hospital treatments improved for Covid? What things work and what don't? Have any lessons been learned regarding treatment? Is keeping warm important, since Covid is a type of cold or flu?*

*You said regarding "contributory cause of death":  
"A contributory cause of death is any cause of death that is neither the immediate, intervening, originating antecedent nor underlying cause; hence there are other significant conditions that contributed to the fatal outcome, but were not related to the disease or condition directly causing death."*

*Please can you outline the "immediate, intervening, originating antecedent and underlying" or direct causes of death for people listed as having Covid as contributory to their deaths.  
That is, what are or were their main causes of death, eg cancer, heart conditions, stroke, aneurysm, collapse and so on?*

*What percentage of people die with Covid as "underlying" and what percentage die with Covid as "contributory"?*

## Response

For the sake of clarity, I will answer each question in turn.

**Are you referring in this [HNZ00031073] answer to Covid deaths in the first wave of Covid (delta variant) only, or to deaths in the first and second waves (delta and omicron)? Are these categories of death what you use now?**

The previous response was related to all “waves” of COVID-19. However, over the course of the pandemic, the main metric tracking COVID-19 deaths has shifted from deaths ‘with COVID-19’ to deaths ‘from COVID-19’. The change in death reporting occurred in mid-2022 and has not changed since.

You can find the current guidelines around certifying cause of death for COVID-19 related deaths can be found at [www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/for-the-health-sector/health-sector-guidance/burial-and-cremation-act-1964/completing-death-documents/covid-19-deaths/](http://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/for-the-health-sector/health-sector-guidance/burial-and-cremation-act-1964/completing-death-documents/covid-19-deaths/)

**With Covid, what are the "trains of events" that lead to death? (eg cough, shortness of breath, etc). In other words, by what physical mechanisms does Covid cause death?**

**What are the hospital treatments for people with Covid "as an underlying cause", that is, presumably, when Covid is their main or only illness?**

**Have hospital treatments improved for Covid? What things work and what don't? Have any lessons been learned regarding treatment? Is keeping warm important, since Covid is a type of cold or flu?**

Information on these topics is publicly available at a wide range of sources. This includes clinical information regarding the ways in which the COVID-19 virus can infect the human body and result in severe health outcomes.

In particular, you may be interested in the COVID-19 Part of the Communicable Disease Manual, available at [www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/for-the-health-sector/health-sector-guidance/communicable-disease-control-manual/covid-19/](http://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/for-the-health-sector/health-sector-guidance/communicable-disease-control-manual/covid-19/). It includes information on the disease, spread of infection, case definition, and case management.

You can also find information on Clinical Management of COVID-19 in Hospitalised Adults on our at [www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/assets/For-the-health-sector/COVID-19-Information-for-health-professionals/COVID-19-for-all-health-professionals/Clinical-Management-of-COVID-19-in-Hospitalised-Adults.pdf](http://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/assets/For-the-health-sector/COVID-19-Information-for-health-professionals/COVID-19-for-all-health-professionals/Clinical-Management-of-COVID-19-in-Hospitalised-Adults.pdf).

It is important to note that these suggested resources are intended to guide health practitioners and are just some of many. Further information on the topics can be found using the search function on our website [www.tewhatauora.govt.nz](http://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz).

**Please can you outline the "immediate, intervening, originating antecedent and underlying" or direct causes of death for people listed as having Covid as contributory to their deaths. That is, what are or were their main causes of death, eg cancer, heart conditions, stroke, aneurysm, collapse and so on?**

This part of your request is refused under section 18(g) of the Act as the information you have requested is not held by Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora and we have no grounds to believe that the information is held by another entity subject to the Act.

Please note that we do not make mortality data available publicly until most deaths have been assigned a cause of death, so that the data released is complete and accurate. Currently, 2019 is the most recent year for which cause of death data is available.

This is because after the close of a calendar year, there is a 12-18 months process to assign cause of death codes to the majority of deaths in that year. Our clinical coding team reviews the death certificate and health history of the deceased, to assign cause of death codes. However, approximately 10% of deaths are referred to the Coroner each year to determine cause. Deaths which require a coronial inquiry can take 2-3 or more years for cause of death to be determined.

### **What percentage of people die with Covid as "underlying" and what percentage die with Covid as "contributory"?**

This information is publicly available as a total number at [www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/our-health-system/data-and-statistics/covid-19-data/covid-19-current-cases/#deaths-with-covid-19](http://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/our-health-system/data-and-statistics/covid-19-data/covid-19-current-cases/#deaths-with-covid-19)

### **How to get in touch**

If you have any questions, you can contact us at [hnzOIA@health.govt.nz](mailto:hnzOIA@health.govt.nz).

If you are not happy with this response, you have the right to make a complaint to the Ombudsman. Information about how to do this is available at [Ombudsman New Zealand | Tari o te Kaitiaki Mana Tangata](http://www.ombudsman.govt.nz) or by phoning 0800 802 602.

As this information may be of interest to other members of the public, Te Whatu Ora may proactively release a copy of this response on our website. All requester data, including your name and contact details, will be removed prior to release.

Nāku iti noa, nā



### **Matt Hannant**

Director

National Public Health Service

Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora

**Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa**  
New Zealand Government

[TeWhatuOra.govt.nz](http://TeWhatuOra.govt.nz)

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