

Requirements for the retention of laboratory records and diagnostic material (Ninth Edition 2022)

Retention period for COVID-19 test samples

Fact sheet

This fact sheet supports pathology laboratories by providing guidance on the retention period for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) test samples for diagnostic microbiological examination.

Issue

The National Pathology Accreditation Advisory Council's (NPAAC) *Requirements for the retention of laboratory records and diagnostic material* (the *Retention standard*) sets out the expected requirements pathology laboratories are to achieve for retaining laboratory records and materials, including specimens (test samples).

Table 10 of the *Retention standard* outlines the minimum retention times for microbiology, including test samples for nucleic acid testing to confirm a diagnosis of COVID-19.

To create capacity for positive COVID-19 test samples, provisions were made in the eighth edition of the *Retention standard* to reduce the retention period for negative COVID-19 test samples to one week during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The increased demand for nucleic acid testing, such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, to confirm laboratory diagnosis of COVID-19 has resulted in widespread pressure across the health system. Also, the high volume of positive COVID-19 test samples has overwhelmed the storage capacity of many pathology laboratories.

While guidance in the *Retention standard* does not override the minimum retention times for records or specimens mandated by state and territory governments or commercial agreements or contracts, it is intended to ease the compliance burden on pathology laboratories and service providers.

All pathology laboratories and service providers are responsible for ensuring systems and processes are in place to meet the expected requirements for pathology accreditation, including any jurisdictional requirements for managing health information or other materials.

NPAAC RECOMMENDATION

To reduce the burden on pathology laboratories during the COVID-19 pandemic, NPAAC recommends the retention period for both positive and negative COVID-19 test samples is reduced to one week after results are released to consumers.

Considerations

Before applying this recommendation, pathology laboratories are to seek advice from the state or territory government or health department of where they are geographically based about any expected retention requirements for COVID-19 test samples mandated under public health orders. These jurisdictional requirements override the expected actions in the *Retention standard* and NPAAC's recommendation.

Pathology laboratories may choose to retain positive and/or negative COVID-19 test samples longer than the recommended one week period.

Learn more about NPAAC and the pathology standards

Please visit: safetyandquality.gov.au/pathology

You can also contact the project team at: pathology@safetyandquality.gov.au

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