

18 July 2022

MPS Guidance on the risks of prescribing anti-viral medications to treat COVID -19 infections.

Please note, the following guidance is general in nature. It is not specific legal advice. Please contact MPS on 0800 2255677 for advice on specific cases.

The purpose of this update is to caution MPS members about the risks of prescribing antiviral medications to treat COVID-19 infections.

On 14 July 2022 the New Zealand Government announced expanded eligibility for such medicines:¹

From Monday 18 July anyone over 75 years of age who has tested positive for COVID-19 or anyone who has been admitted previously to an Intensive Care Unit directly as a result of COVID-19, will be eligible to access antivirals through their GP.

This will help alleviate pressure on primary care by removing the need for GPs to review every COVID-19 patient that may be eligible for antivirals.

To speed up access to antivirals, GPs can now provide back pocket prescriptions which means at-risk patients for acute respiratory illnesses can be preapproved and have their prescription ready should they become unwell and need the medicine immediately

To support this decision, Pharmac has published updated access criteria for antiviral COVID-19 treatments.² The Government also intends to reclassify the relevant medicines from being prescription only to 'restricted', meaning pharmacists can then supply them without a prescription.

The RNZCGP has voiced concerns about the loosening of restrictions on such medicines, commenting:³

The key issues around de-restricting Paxlovid are:

1. *This is a complex clinical decision when prescribing for some patients.*
2. *There is currently no secure and efficient way to notify the usual prescriber that a patient has been given Paxlovid, which means there's no safeguard to address contraindications.*
3. *The proposed approach allows any health practitioner with prescribing rights to prescribe a medication that has potentially serious side effects. This is very different to how other de-restricted medications are normally prescribed.*
4. *Adjusting other medications that interact with Paxlovid is a clinical decision and time needs to be taken to discuss this. Also, many patients on multiple medications may struggle to adjust to these changes. Until these issues are solved, the College does not agree with de-restriction, and it would not be in the interests of patient and community safety to go ahead with this. ...*

In MPS's view the Government announcement raises three important issues.

First, it is not clear from Pharmac's access criteria that 'back pocket' prescriptions can be given. Nor would it be clinically safe to give a 'back pocket' prescription for a medicine like Paxlovid in every case.

Second, GPs may be contacted by pharmacists about specific patients seeking antiviral medication from a pharmacy. Clinicians are responsible for the advice given to patients and other healthcare professionals such

¹ <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-measures-tackle-covid-19-and-flu> .

² <https://pharmac.govt.nz/news-and-resources/consultations-and-decisions/july-2022-access-criteria-updated-covid-19-antivirals/> .

³ https://www.rnzcgp.org.nz/RNZCGP/News/College_news/2022/College_of_GPs_cautious_about_open_access_to_COVID-19_medication_Paxlovid.aspx .

as Pharmacists. GPs will need to think through how to handle these situations, particularly if they are assuming some responsibility for the wisdom of dispensing to a patient without becoming the prescriber.

Third, the announcement may lead to pressure on GPs to prescribe Paxlovid for eligible patients quickly, as it is only indicated if started within 5 days of symptom onset. Despite such pressure, there is no indication the Medical Council or Health and Disability Commissioner will forgive a lower standard of care. MPS recommends that members re-familiarise themselves with:

- The Medsafe datasheets and product safety information for Paxlovid,⁴ Lagevrio⁵ and Veklury.
- The Medical Council's statement on 'Good Prescribing Practice'.⁶

The Paxlovid datasheet states that it is contraindicated in a number of conditions and dosage adjustments need to be made in some situations. There is also a long list of medications that are contraindicated for concomitant use or have significant interactions with Paxlovid. Many patients who will be eligible for Paxlovid have multiple co-morbidities and are on multiple medications. The safe prescribing of Paxlovid will not be a simple 5-minute consultation. Practitioners will also need to be able to provide patients with appropriate information and clear instructions, together with safety-netting advice.

⁴ <https://www.medsafe.govt.nz/profs/Datasheet/p/paxlovidtab.pdf> .

⁵ <https://www.medsafe.govt.nz/profs/datasheet/l/lagevirocap.pdf> .

⁶ <https://www.mcnz.org.nz/assets/standards/ceae513c85/Statement-on-good-prescribing-practice.pdf> .