

Newsletter 22 September 2020

Antibody testing and Back to West End Mall

We are excitedly heading into hopefully the final phase of lockdown – Level 1, with the State of Disaster extended until mid-October. Our national COVID-19 new cases are reportedly approximately 2000 per day, which is noticeably lower than the figures in July. It is time for all businesses to re-open and the economy to start an upward turn.

On the 23rd September I will at last be moving back into our old premises at West End Mall, Mutualpark building, and from 25th September all face to face consultations will be at the West End Medical Suite.

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SARS-CoV-2 testing

Most of us are aware of the SARS-CoV-2 PCR testing for COVID-19. This is a swab test taken from the nasopharynx and tested for the presence of virus RNA. It is best to test on Day 3 of symptoms. The testing guidelines in the Western Cape have expanded to include any school-going person or teacher, as well as anyone who is in the workplace, presenting with an acute flu-like illness.

The most recent additions to our testing for SARS-CoV-2 are the antibody tests. These tests indirectly measure exposure or infection, by detecting antibodies made in the normal immune response to a viral infection. Immunoglobulin M (IgM), which indicates a current or recent infection, can best be detected at about 10-14 days after a viral infection. After about 5 weeks it disappears. Immunoglobulin G (IgG) can best be detected from about 14-21 days after an infection, and these levels can be maintained for much longer, possibly even years. It is unknown at present whether IgG antibodies detected in the blood tests indicate immunity to re-infection, or for how long protection from re-infection may last. However, detection of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies confirms exposure, and is a useful statistic.

It stands to reason that the antibody test is not helpful in an acute infection, only the PCR test is useful. However, if one has a (false) negative PCR test but clinically has a COVID-19 infection, a positive antibody test on Day 10-14 would confirm the diagnosis. Antibody testing is useful for screening in communities and determining the overall extent of exposure to the virus or the prevalence of infection in specific populations. The antibody test is also used in SARS-CoV-2 vaccine research to determine vaccine efficacy.

Yours in health



Dr Louise Wiggins