

## The Health Support Service for Dioxin Exposed People

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The Health Support Service for Dioxin Exposed People (the Service) is a programme for people who were exposed to dioxin from the former Ivon Watkins Dow factory in Paritutu, New Plymouth.

### What is the Health Support Service for Dioxin Exposed People?

The Service is based on a free annual health check delivered by a primary care team in a general practice setting. It includes referrals to other publicly funded services depending on patient's health needs, like referral to smoking cessation programmes, physical activity programmes, nutrition advice, mental health services, genetic counselling, and serum dioxin testing (under limited circumstances).

### Do I have to determine my patient's eligibility for the Service?

No. Eligibility is based on where and for how long an individual lived or worked in relation to the former Ivon Watkins Dow factory and whether they are entitled to publicly funded health services in New Zealand.

An individual's eligibility will be determined on application to the Deputy Director-General of Population Health. An appeals process is available for unsuccessful applicants.

### How will I know if one of my patients is eligible for the Service?

Applicants must provide the name of their general practitioner, family doctor, or medical centre with their application. The nominated practitioner of successful applicants will then be informed in writing by the Service Secretariat that the patient is eligible for

the Service. At this time, the nominated practitioner will be given information about the Service, specific tools for use in the health check, and a claim form.

### Specific questions about the annual health check

#### What is the free annual health check?

Eligible individuals are entitled to a free annual health check. The content of each check depends on the patient's medical history, current health needs, and the clinical decisions made by the primary care team. The free health check generally involves:

- talking about dioxin exposure, its health effects, and the patient's exposure
- talking about the patient's health and providing brief advice on staying healthy
- discussing any mental health concerns the patient may have
- considering whether the patient has any symptoms or conditions associated with dioxin exposure and completing a physical examination if necessary and
- referring the patient to Green Prescription programmes, nutrition services, smoking cessation, mental health, genetic counselling, or serum dioxin testing (under limited circumstances).

Specific guidance is also available.

#### Will the first health check be the same as subsequent annual checks?

The content of each health check depends on the health needs of the individual, good clinical practice, and the clinical judgement of the

primary care team. Some patients will receive similar services each year while others will get different services.

### **Who should deliver the annual health check?**

The annual health check is delivered by a primary care team in a general practice setting. The primary care team will need to decide who should be involved and how.

### **What is the service fee for the annual health check?**

The fee for the first annual health check is \$220+GST per health check per person. The fee for the second and all subsequent annual health check is \$75+GST per health check per person. No other fee or co-payment can be charged to the patient.

### **Are laboratory or pharmaceutical costs included in the service fee?**

Any diagnostic tests or treatment/management services referred from the health check are publicly funded as normal. Serum dioxin testing may be funded separately.

### **How do I claim the service fee for the annual health check?**

To claim the service fee, you must complete the service claim form and return it to HealthPAC. One claim form must be completed per patient. This includes providing the monitoring information requested. This form will be sent to you.

### **What information do I need to provide to the Ministry of Health?**

The Ministry of Health requires that you provide the following information when submitting a claim for the health check up: full name of the patient, patient NHI, patient's date of birth, date and duration of the health check, health support service components that the patient was referred to, name of the general practice, and the name and registration details of the health practitioner delivering the health check.

This information is collected on the claim form and must be provided before the claim is paid.

## **Specific questions about the referred services**

### **What services can I refer a patient to?**

You can refer your patient to the following services as they exist in your area:

- the Green Prescription programme or other physical activity programmes
- dietician and nutrition services
- smoking cessation and support services to modify risky drinking behaviours
- primary mental health services or
- the Regional Genetics Service, or screening for neural tube defects as per the section 88 maternity notice (if lead maternity carer).

### **How do I refer a patient to these services?**

As patients will be accessing existing local services, you will need to consider the referral guidelines and processes of each specific programme.

### **Will there be cost to the patient for referral?**

Patients pay the usual cost to access referred services. In many cases, these services are free or offered at low or very low cost. Genetic counselling services are free.

## **Specific questions about serum dioxin testing**

### **What is serum dioxin testing?**

In the blood, dioxins bind to lipids and lipoproteins. Serum TCDD levels are highly correlated with adipose tissue TCDD levels. Serum dioxin testing involves taking about 90 millilitres of the whole blood. The serum must be extracted from whole blood within 30 minutes of it being taken before being sent to a technical testing laboratory. Test results are expressed on a lipid weight basis.

Serum dioxin testing is not usually recommended for individuals. Results only tell a person what the level of dioxin in their blood is today. It is an unreliable way to measure their past exposure to dioxin. Dioxin has a generally accepted average half-life of between 7 and 11 years; however half-life varies depending on age at exposure, gender, amount of body fat, breastfeeding, and dose. Any dioxin present will naturally decrease over time although at varying rates. Also, serum dioxin testing:

- cannot give a likely cause or prognosis for a current health condition
- cannot reliably help to estimate a person's current health risks
- could mislead a person about their past exposure to dioxin and
- could mislead a person about their current health risks.

Serum dioxin tests are not routinely done. They have previously been used most frequently as part of research studies. Serum dioxin tests may be available privately but because of the highly specialised nature of the serum dioxin test and the small number of service providers, serum dioxins tests are very expensive.

### **If there are limitations with the test, why is it included in the Service?**

The Ministry of Health recognises that some exposed individuals may be very concerned about their blood level of dioxin to a point where this may affect their normal functioning. Knowing what their serum dioxin level is may help some to move on and bring about significant improvements in mental health where the test is a part of a broader therapeutic programme.

### **Who is eligible for a serum dioxin test?**

Because of the limitations associated with serum dioxin tests, they are not available to every person who is eligible for the Service. Access is enabled where a general practitioner considers that the test result will materially benefit the patient as part of a wider

therapeutic programme, where the patient has a realistic understanding of the test's limitations, and where a special approval has been granted.

### **How can a patient access the serum dioxin test?**

A patient may request a serum dioxin test at the time of the annual health check. If this occurs, there are a number of steps that must be taken before the patient can be referred to the laboratory for blood taking:

1. There is a discussion about the limitations of the serum dioxin test and the patient is full informed of these.
2. A general practitioner conducts an assessment of need (based on provided guidance).
3. A general practitioner makes an application for special approval to refer the patient for the test.
4. The special approval is considered by the Ministry of Health.

A patient may also be referred to a general practitioner from mental health services, where a provider has identified that knowing a serum dioxin level would materially benefit a patient's emotional wellbeing as part of a broader therapeutic programme.

### **How are the test results communicated to the patient?**

The results of the serum dioxin test are sent the general practitioner and the laboratory. Funding for an additional consultation is available (if the patient would like re-referral to their general practitioner to explain the results). Test results will also be available to the patient if they would like these.

### **How do I interpret the serum dioxin test results?**

Specific interpretation support will be provided when serum dioxin test results are returned.

## **What funding is available for the serum dioxin test?**

The serum dioxin test and consultation are free to the individual. The funding for this is covered in the funding for the health check. No other fee or co-payment can be charged to the patient.

## **Getting more information**

### **Where can I get more information?**

You can get more information about dioxin exposure, its health effects, and the Service from the Ministry of Health.

## **Where can my patient get more information?**

The Ministry of Health has developed a range of information for eligible patients and other interested individuals. This information is included on the Ministry of Health's website. General information about the Service and about dioxin exposure and health effects has also been provided to eligible individuals as part of their eligibility pack. A factsheet on serum dioxin testing is available on the Ministry of Health's website.

If your patient would like more information, s/he can discuss this with you, or they can contact the Ministry of Health.

Ministry of Health

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Wellington

Email: [emailmoh@moh.govt.nz](mailto:emailmoh@moh.govt.nz)

Telephone: 0800 288 588

Website: [www.moh.govt.nz/dioxins](http://www.moh.govt.nz/dioxins)

Specific technical questions can be directed to 0800 288 588, and will be forwarded to the appropriate expert for response. We expect to return a response to you within 5 working days.