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Rapid COVID-19 testing ‘crunch’ could see Australians pay more

Tom McIlroy *Political reporter*



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[Suppliers of at-home COVID-19 tests](#) say Australia faces a supply crunch as it reopens from lockdowns, with stretched overseas manufacturing channels and worldwide demand likely to push up prices.

Australians will be able to test themselves for COVID-19 at home from November 1 as rapid antigen tests become available in chemists and convenience stores.



Atomo Diagnostics founder John Kelly with the company's testing kit. **Kate Geraghty**

Australian company Atomo Diagnostics has signed a deal with US-based supplier Access Bio for up to 20 million testing kits before the end of 2022, including 10 million Atomo-branded self-test kits for use at home.

The product has received emergency use authorisation from the US Food and Drug Administration and will be considered by Australia's regulator, the Therapeutics Goods Administration.

Atomo founder John Kelly warned that countries around the world were racing to secure supply. Last week [US President Joe Biden announced plans](#) to spend \$1 billion on at-home testing, including buying an additional 180 million rapid tests over 12 months.

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Strong demand has seen available testing kits sell quickly across the US and some suppliers say a production ramp-up will take time to flow through to consumers.

“I think there’s a high likelihood of some supply issues based on the fact the rest of the world has significantly increased their internal demand. There’s only a finite amount of monthly capacity in the system,” Dr Kelly told *The Australian Financial Review*.

“I think there will be some challenges, further exacerbated by the fact that it is nearly impossible to get air freight into Australia because of reduced flights.

“Between the supply issues and the logistics issues, it is going to be a challenge. It’s certainly costing more to get stuff into the country.”

At least 30 products are already approved for supervised use and 70 companies have expressed interest to the regulator. The TGA is working with manufacturers to adapt the products for at-home use.

Rapid testing kits cost between \$5 and \$20 each for consumers.

Last week [the Victorian government said it was in talks to fund local manufacture of rapid COVID-19 tests](#), part of plans to help reopen schools, offices and major events. The state has purchased more than 2.2 million tests.

[Brisbane-based biotech firm Ellume](#) is selling tests to America and won a US Department of Defence supply contract worth \$US230 million (\$313 million) earlier this year. Melbourne-based Pantonic Health is [among companies selling rapid point-of-care kits](#) to business and government.

Dr Kelly said Atomo was the only company in Australia with previous TGA approval for self-test kits for infectious diseases. Customer services and supply chains for the company’s HIV test are already in place.



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“We supplied the Australia Olympic team with COVID-19 tests and started to run some pilots in aged care because we thought they were particularly vulnerable to outbreaks,” he said.

“Clearly there is a lot of demand, and I think it is only going to increase now. That coincides with other countries ramping up their internal consumption, so I think there’s going to be a bit of a crunch.”

Rapid technology tests are designed to detect virus antigens, or proteins, and work best early in the COVID-19 infection cycle when viral load is at its highest.

The two-minute test uses samples from the throat and nose placed in a chemical solution and applied to a cartridge, similar to those used in some pregnancy test kits. Results are available in as little as 10 minutes.

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