Patient Guide to COVID-19 Testing

There are a lot of different tests for COVID-19. Knowing when you or a loved one should get tested and which test you should get can be confusing. The goal of this guide is to help you better understand testing for COVID-19.

No test is perfect, so it is important to understand what test you are getting and what the results mean.

What are the types of COVID-19 tests?

Viral Tests

- Viral tests look for the presence of the virus that causes COVID-19 in your body. The virus takes a few days to be detectable after you are exposed but can be present even without symptoms.
- Viral tests require a swab from your nose.
- Viral tests are processed one of two ways: sent to a lab or processed quickly in your doctor's office (like a flu test).
- Viral tests sent to a lab are the best at telling if you do or do not have the virus that causes COVID-19. Tests that are processed in your doctor's office may give a false negative result.

Antibody Tests

- Antibody tests look for the body's immune response, called antibodies, to the virus that causes COVID-19. Antibodies can usually be detected weeks to months after the infection.
- Antibody tests require a blood draw.
- This test can tell you if you have been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 in the past.
- This test **CANNOT** tell you if you are protected against future infections with the virus that causes COVID-19.

When should I get a viral test?

If you have symptoms of COVID-19, you should get a viral test.

Even if you do not have symptoms, if you have been in close contact with someone with COVID-19, live in close contact with many other people (like a homeless shelter or nursing facility), are considered an essential worker (grocery store clerk, gas station attendant, child care worker, processing plant, etc.) or have attended a mass gathering such a protest or rally.

You can check your symptoms and find nearby testing sites here: https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/about-covid-19/testing.

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✕ When should I get an antibody test?

An antibody test (also called "serology") tells you that you may have been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 in the past. It cannot diagnose COVID-19 (you need a viral test for that) and we do not yet know if having had the infection in the past means that you are protected from infection with the virus that causes COVID-19 in the future. Because of these limitations there are only two groups of people we currently recommend getting antibody tests:

1. People participating in research studies
2. Children with suspected Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C)

In either of these cases, the research study or your doctor will tell you that they recommend the test.

What do my test results mean?

Test	Result	What Does It Mean?
Viral Test Sent to a Lab	Positive +	You are currently infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. Follow CDC guidelines for what to do. Someone from the COVID-19 Community Team will contact you with important information on keeping yourself and others safe. [1]
	Negative -	You are probably not currently infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. However, it is possible that you have the virus and the test was not able to detect it. Talk to your doctor or nurse to find out if you should self-quarantine and/or if you should get another test in a few days.
Viral Test Processed in Doctor's Office	Positive +	You are currently infected with the virus that causes COVID-19. Follow CDC guidelines for what to do. Someone from the COVID-19 Community Team will contact you with important information on keeping yourself and others safe. [1]
	Negative -	You may still be currently infected with the virus. You may need to get a viral test that is sent to a lab to be sure. Talk to your doctor or nurse about if you need another viral test.
Antibody Test	Positive +	You may have been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 in the past. Sometimes this test will be positive because you had a virus like COVID-19 and not the same virus as COVID-19. This does NOT tell you if you are protected from the virus that causes COVID-19.
	Negative -	You probably have not been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 in the past. This test does NOT tell you if you are infected with the virus now. Talk to your doctor or nurse about getting a viral test if you have symptoms or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.

[1] https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/index.html

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