COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

There are two main types of COVID-19 tests:

- **Diagnostic (virus) tests**: use respiratory specimens (nose swab or saliva specimens) to identify whether someone has COVID-19 now.
- **Antibody tests** (also called serology tests): blood tests used to identify whether someone had COVID-19 at some point in the past.

To find a testing site, visit nyc.gov/covidtest. Many sites offer testing at no cost and regardless of immigration status.

**Diagnostic Tests for Current Infection**

**How is diagnostic testing done?**
Diagnostic testing involves collecting a specimen by inserting a swab (similar to a long Q-tip) into your nose or throat or by collecting saliva. The test may be performed on site or the specimen may be sent to a laboratory. If you have symptoms of COVID-19, you should isolate at home while waiting for your test results.

**Who should get a COVID-19 diagnostic test?**
People who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 should get tested if they have symptoms of COVID-19. They should also get tested three to five days after having close contact with someone who was diagnosed with COVID-19 or following international travel. Fully vaccinated means two weeks after the second dose of a two-dose vaccine or one week after receiving a single-dose vaccine.

People who are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19 should get tested if they:
- Have symptoms
- Had close contact with someone who was diagnosed with COVID-19
- Recently attended a large indoor gathering
- Were recently traveling
- Are planning to attend a large event or visit someone who is unvaccinated and at increased risk of severe COVID-19 illness

If you are unvaccinated, you should also consider periodic testing if you have frequent in-person interactions with others at work or socially — especially if you are in close contact with people without face coverings in indoor settings.

People who had COVID-19 in the past three months and recovered do not need to be tested, unless they have COVID-19 symptoms. There may be different testing requirements in certain settings, such as schools and group living facilities.
For more information on frequency of testing, see NYC COVID-19 Testing Frequency Recommendations.

What are the different types of COVID-19 diagnostic tests?
There are two types of COVID-19 diagnostic tests:

- **Molecular tests** (often called **PCR** or **Nucleic Acid Amplification** tests) – These tests detect genetic material of the virus that causes COVID-19. Molecular tests generally require the specimen to be sent to a laboratory, which is why it usually takes a few days to receive results. **COVID-19 molecular tests are very accurate**, as they can detect the virus even if there is only a small amount in your system.

- **Antigen tests** (often called **point-of-care (POC) or rapid tests**) – These tests detect certain proteins in the virus that causes COVID-19. Antigen tests are relatively inexpensive and usually are processed in a health care provider’s office, rather than a laboratory. For this reason, results are usually ready quickly (in under an hour). However, **COVID-19 antigen tests are generally not as accurate as molecular tests**. There are both false positive test results (the test result is positive even though the person doesn’t have COVID-19) and false negative test results (the test result is negative even though the person has COVID-19), with false negative test results being more common. For this reason, it is recommended that health care providers perform a follow-up molecular test to confirm the test results in certain circumstances, such as when a person has symptoms of COVID-19 but the antigen test is negative.

What is at-home testing?
COVID-19 at-home testing allows some or all parts of the testing process to take place at home. Home testing kits provide the necessary supplies to collect a specimen yourself (such as a swab and a container or bag to put the swab in to avoid contamination). For some at-home tests, the specimen must be sent to a laboratory for testing. Results usually take a few days. Other at-home tests allow you to perform the test yourself at home without sending the specimen to a lab. If it is a prescription test, you should share your test result with the health care provider who prescribed the test.

What type of testing is performed at the NYC Health Department’s COVID-19 Express sites?
COVID-19 Express uses a PCR molecular test. We have laboratories with automated testing machines on site, which allow patients to receive results in 24 hours or less. To learn more and make an appointment, visit the COVID-19 Express webpage.

How do I know what kind of COVID-19 diagnostic test to get?
Your health care provider can help decide which type of test is best for you based on the reason for your testing, such as a recent exposure, presence of symptoms or periodic testing. If you get an antigen test, your provider may recommend a molecular test to confirm your test result, depending on your reason for testing.
What does a positive diagnostic test result mean?
A positive test result means that you most likely have COVID-19 and must stay home and take precautions to reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others. Information about what to do when sick, how to protect others and when you can leave home is available at nyc.gov/health/coronavirus. If you are unable to separate from others at home, you may be eligible for a free hotel room.

What does a negative diagnostic test result mean?
A negative test result means that you most likely do not have COVID-19. You should continue to practice good hand hygiene and physical distancing, and wear a face covering. This is especially important if you have symptoms because it is possible you have the virus but the test did not detect it.

If you have symptoms and are isolating while you wait for your test result, you cannot end isolation if you test negative by an antigen test; rather, a molecular test is required to confirm your test result and end isolation. This is because of the risk of false negative test results with antigen tests.

When making decisions based on test results, always consider the type of test you received. For example, if you live with or plan to visit someone at increased risk for severe COVID-19, keep in mind that molecular tests are more accurate.

If I have been vaccinated against COVID-19, will I test positive for COVID-19?
The vaccines cannot give you COVID-19 or make you test positive for COVID-19. The vaccines do not contain the virus that causes COVID-19. If you test positive for COVID-19, that means you likely have COVID-19 due to a recent exposure.

Antibody Tests for Past Infection

What are antibodies?
Antibodies are special proteins that the body produces to help fight off infections. They can be produced even if a person has few or no symptoms. Sometimes antibodies protect us from getting the same infection again, and this is likely also true for COVID-19.

What is the purpose of COVID-19 antibody testing?
Antibody testing can help us better understand COVID-19, including how the body responds to the virus and how often the virus causes an infection with symptoms. It can also help us estimate how many people have had COVID-19. Antibody tests are not recommended for the purpose of deciding whether to get vaccinated.

Who can get an antibody test?
Antibodies take time to develop when someone is sick, so antibody testing will not be accurate for someone who is or was recently sick. Antibody testing should not be performed on
someone who has COVID-19 symptoms, had COVID-19 symptoms within the last two weeks or had a positive diagnostic test for COVID-19 within the past two weeks (based on the date the sample was taken).

**How is antibody testing done?**
Antibody testing requires getting a blood sample through a finger stick or drawing blood from a vein in your arm.

**What does a positive antibody test result mean?**
A positive test result means that antibodies were detected in your blood and that **you likely had COVID-19 at some point in the past**. However, it is also possible you did not have COVID-19 and the antibodies detected were from an infection with a related virus. This is sometimes called a false positive.

**What does a negative antibody test result mean?**
A negative test result means that antibodies were not detected in your blood and that you most likely have **not** had COVID-19. However, it could also mean that you had COVID-19 but:
- There has not been enough time for antibodies to develop, or
- Your body did not produce enough antibodies for the test to be able to detect them, or
- There were problems with the accuracy of the antibody test that was used.

**If I test positive, does that mean I am immune to COVID-19?**
No. Antibody tests can play an important role in identifying whether someone may have been exposed to the COVID-19 virus and may have developed an immune response. However, antibody tests should not be used to determine immunity or protection against COVID-19. While antibodies from a prior infection offer some protection, it is possible to get COVID-19 again.

**If I have COVID-19 antibodies, should I still get a COVID-19 vaccine?**
Yes. People should get vaccinated even if they have had COVID-19 and have antibodies. Vaccination is a safe way to help boost and strengthen your immune response to reduce the chance of getting COVID-19 again. The vaccines may also provide better protection against new, more contagious variants of the virus, such as the Delta variant.

**If I have been vaccinated against COVID-19, will I test positive for antibodies?**
Antibody tests are not recommended after vaccination. Antibody tests should not be used to determine immunity or protection against COVID-19, especially after a person has received COVID-19 vaccination. Currently authorized antibody tests have not been evaluated to determine the level of protection provided by an immune response to COVID-19 vaccination. Also, some antibody tests do not test for the type of antibodies that are produced in response to the vaccines, so a negative antibody test does not mean the vaccine is not working. Further, our bodies build other defenses from the vaccines, including T-cells (special white blood cells that fight infection), which are not detected by antibody tests.
See the U.S. Food and Drug Administration statement about COVID-19 antibody tests.

**Will my test result affect whether I can go to work?**
No. A positive or negative antibody test result should not be used to make any decisions about going to work by you or your employer. You should continue to wear a face covering and use the personal protective equipment recommended by your employer regardless of your test result.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 8.4.2021