COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

There are two main types of tests:
- **Diagnostic tests**: swab or saliva tests used to identify whether someone **currently** has COVID-19 (that is, whether they are currently sick).
- **Antibody tests** (also called **serology tests**): blood tests used to identify whether someone had COVID-19 at some point in the **past**.

Diagnostic Tests for Current Infection

How is diagnostic testing done?
A diagnostic test is performed by inserting a swab (similar to a long Q-tip) into your nose or throat, or by collecting saliva. Usually the swab or saliva sample needs to be sent to a lab, though some tests can be run in a health care provider's office. If you have symptoms of COVID-19, you should stay home as much as possible while waiting for your test results (and, if you are positive, continue to do so).

Who should get a COVID-19 diagnostic test?
All New Yorkers should get tested for COVID-19. It is especially important to get tested if you have symptoms, were in close contact with someone who was diagnosed with COVID-19 or had symptoms of COVID-19, were recently at a protest or other large gathering, are planning to visit someone at high risk of severe illness, live or work in a group residential setting (such as a nursing home), or work in health care or have a job that involves regular close contact with others. To find a testing site, visit **nyc.gov/covidtest**.

What does a positive diagnostic test result mean?
A **positive** test result means that **you most likely have COVID-19 now** and should stay home and take precautions to reduce the risk of spreading the virus, including using a face covering and practicing good hand hygiene and physical distancing. Information about what to do when sick, how to protect others, when you can leave home and when to get care is available at **nyc.gov/health/coronavirus**.

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.

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. It generally takes some time after infection for antibodies to be produced and become detectable in blood. Sometimes antibodies protect us from getting the same infection again, but **we do not yet know if this is true for COVID-19**. We also do not yet know how quickly antibodies are produced when someone has COVID-19 or about likely differences in the amount and type of antibodies people produce in response to infection.

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. **These tests are important for public health but hard to interpret for personal health, since we do not yet know if antibodies make people immune to the virus.**

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. Your blood sample will then be sent to a lab.

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.

If I test positive, does that mean I am immune to COVID-19?
We do not yet know whether antibodies developed in response to COVID-19 protect us from getting it again or, if there is some protection, how long it lasts. It is important that you continue to follow physical distancing, practice good hand hygiene and wear a face covering.

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, is it safe for me to be around my family and others?
A positive test result means that you likely had COVID-19 at some point in the past. Given the amount of time that has passed, you are likely no longer contagious from that infection. However, we still do not know if you can get COVID-19 again.

Will my test result affect whether I can go to work?
No. A positive or negative 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.   7.13.20