COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

There are two main types of COVID-19 tests:
- **Diagnostic (virus) tests**: swab or saliva tests used 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.

**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. 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?
All New Yorkers should get tested for COVID-19. It is especially important to get tested if you have symptoms or were in close contact with someone who has COVID-19. You should also get tested if you were recently traveling or at a large gathering or live with or are planning to visit someone at increased risk of severe COVID-19 illness. People who live or work in a congregate residential setting or work outside the home and interact with others should consider periodic testing. See COVID-19 testing recommendations for more information. To find a testing site, visit nyc.gov/covidtest.

What are the different types of COVID-19 diagnostic tests?
There are two types of COVID-19 diagnostic tests:
- **Molecular tests** (often called PCR tests) – These tests detect genetic material of the virus that causes COVID-19, usually using a lab technique called polymerase chain reaction (PCR), though other techniques are sometimes used. These 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 can be 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 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. For example, if a person has symptoms of COVID-19 but the antigen test is negative, a molecular test should be performed.
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). In most cases, the specimen must be sent to a laboratory for molecular testing. Results usually take a few days.

A new at-home COVID-19 test allows you to perform the test yourself at home without sending the specimen to a lab. This test is by prescription only. 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 molecular test. We have laboratories with special processing machines on site, which allow patients to receive results in 24 hours or less.

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 recent exposure, presence of symptoms or periodic testing. If you get an antigen test, your provider may recommend a molecular test to confirm whether you have COVID-19, depending on your test result and 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.

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, 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.

**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 for antibodies, 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 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.**