COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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

**Viral (Diagnostic) Testing for COVID-19**

**What is viral testing and how is it done?**

Viral tests are used to determine whether you currently have COVID-19. They involve collecting a specimen by inserting a swab (similar to a long Q-tip) into your nose or throat or collecting saliva. If you have symptoms of COVID-19, stay home (isolate) while waiting for your test result.

**Who should get a COVID-19 viral test?**

Even if vaccinated, everyone should get tested:

- Right away if they have COVID-19 symptoms
- Five days after being exposed to someone with COVID-19
- Before and after travel or attending a large gathering

People who are not vaccinated should get tested more often. People who had confirmed COVID-19 in the past 90 days (they tested positive using a viral test) and recovered do not need to get tested unless they develop symptoms.

**What are the different types of COVID-19 viral tests?**

There are two types of COVID-19 viral tests:

- **PCR and other molecular tests** – These tests look for genetic material of the virus that causes COVID-19. The specimen must be sent to a laboratory and results usually take a few days. PCR tests can detect the virus even if there is only a small amount in your system. However, some people test positive with a PCR test weeks or months after having COVID-19, even though they are no longer contagious.

- **Antigen tests** (often called rapid tests) – These tests look for proteins in the virus that causes COVID-19. They are usually processed at the testing site, or at home when using an at-home test, and results are ready quickly. Antigen tests may not detect the virus if the person was infected very recently or has small amounts of virus in their system. For this reason, a follow-up PCR test should sometimes be performed, such as when a person has COVID-19 symptoms but the antigen test is negative.

**What are at-home tests and when should I use them?**

COVID-19 at-home tests (also called self-tests) allow some or all parts of the testing process to take place at home. Most at-home tests allow you to test the sample yourself, with results in minutes. With some tests, you must collect a nasal or saliva sample and send it to a lab.

At-home test results may not be accepted for some purposes, such as employer or travel testing requirements, or if you later need to provide proof of prior COVID-19 infection. For
more information on at-home testing, including tips for performing at-home tests and how to interpret the results, visit on.nyc.gov/home-testing.

**What does a positive viral test result mean?**
A positive test result means that you most likely have COVID-19 and must isolate and take precautions to reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others. Information about what to do when sick and when you can leave home is available at on.nyc.gov/covid-symptoms. For resources to help isolate at home, call 212-COVID19 (212-268-4319) or visit nych.ealthandhospitals.org/test-and-trace/take-care.

**What does a negative viral test result mean?**
A negative test result means that you most likely do not have COVID-19. If you have symptoms, continue taking precautions like wearing a face mask, because it is possible you have the virus but the test did not detect it.

**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**

**What is antibody testing and how is it done?**
Antibodies are special proteins that the body produces to help fight off infections. COVID-19 antibodies help protect people from getting sick if exposed to the virus. 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 COVID-19 antibodies were detected in your blood. The antibodies could be from having had COVID-19 in the past, from vaccination or from both.

**If I have COVID-19 antibodies, should I still get a COVID-19 vaccine or booster shot?**
Yes. If you have had COVID-19, vaccination is a safe way to strengthen your immune response to reduce your chance of getting COVID-19 again. If you get COVID-19, vaccines greatly reduce your chance of getting very sick, being hospitalized and dying.

**Should I use antibody tests to decide whether to get vaccinated?**
No. Antibody tests cannot test for immunity to COVID-19. They should not be used to decide whether to get vaccinated, as vaccination is recommended even if you have had COVID-19.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 4.4.22