

Types of Tests

When it comes to COVID-19, there are three kinds of tests. One, the PCR test, is a molecular test that looks for genetic material inside the virus, and diagnoses a person as "COVID-19 positive." The turnaround time for results with these tests is usually 24-72 hours. The second, an antigen test, detects certain proteins that are part of the virus, and also diagnoses a person as "COVID-19 positive." The turnaround time ranges from 15 minutes to a couple of hours. The other, an antibody test, shows if a person has been previously exposed to COVID-19, but does not diagnose them.

Antigen Tests

What is an antigen test?

An antigen test is used to identify people with active infections. This test is a diagnostic tool.

A positive result generally means a person currently has COVID-19 and can spread the virus to others.

How does the antigen test work?

Antigen tests work by detecting specific proteins, called antigens, on the surface of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. If the test shows SARS-CoV-2 antigens, then the virus is in the body.

How long do results take?

Results are usually available within 15 minutes to an hour.

When is antigen testing used?

Antigen tests work best for, and are approved for, use in people with symptoms of COVID-19.

Antigen tests are quick and inexpensive. When used appropriately, antigen tests can help identify and control COVID-19 outbreaks in shared living settings like schools, nursing homes or correctional facilities.

How is the testing conducted?

In general, a health care worker will touch a swab to the inside of a person's nose. Sometimes a health care worker will ask you to 'self-collect' using a nasal swab.

Can I take an antigen test at home?

At this time, there are no at-home antigen tests. Companies are still developing antigen tests that can be taken at home.

Where can I get an antigen test?

Antigen tests are available now in some health care facilities.

As more antigen tests become available, you will be able to find them at community testing sites, health clinics, pharmacies, drive-thru sites, and other places you would go to get a COVID-19 test.

When will a person test positive?

Antigen tests work best within the first 7 days of first having symptoms. After 7 days, the test might be negative even if a person has the virus.

If a person has symptoms but has a negative test, a health care provider may recommend a PCR test to confirm results.

How accurate are antigen tests?

Antigen tests are less accurate than PCR tests but they are generally good at detecting the virus. In most cases, when a person with symptoms has a positive antigen test, they have the virus. However, antigen tests can be positive even if the person does not have the virus (false positive). In this case, a provider may recommend a follow-up PCR test to confirm if a person has the virus.

While it is possible for a person infected with COVID-19 to “falsely” have a negative antigen test (false negative), is it not common.

We don't yet know how accurate the test is in people who might have the virus, but do not have symptoms.

If I need a COVID-19 test, should I take an antigen test or a viral PCR test?

Your healthcare provider or testing site staff will decide which test to use. They will also decide what kind of follow-up test to use, if needed.

Both antigen and PCR tests can show if a person has COVID-19. Antigen tests can give results rapidly, often within minutes. PCR tests take more time to perform, but they are on average more accurate at detecting COVID-19 than antigen tests.

A health care provider may recommend a PCR test to confirm test results if:

- You get a positive antigen test but are not likely to have COVID-19
- You get a negative antigen test but you have symptoms or are a close contact of someone with COVID-19

How are antigen tests different from antibody tests?

An antigen test shows if someone has the virus at the time of the test. It can diagnose someone with COVID-19.

An antibody test shows if someone has been exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the past. It is not usually used to diagnose COVID-19.

Are positive antigen test results included in statewide data?

The Department of Health does not include antigen tests in its statewide case count. But you can find a weekly report of positive antigen test results on the [DOH COVID-19 Data Dashboard](#) under “Reports.” Currently, positive antigen cases are a small percentage of all cases statewide.

Some local health departments may be reporting positive antigen cases on their websites.