NYC Health

COVID-19 Testing: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Testing for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is evolving, including how we detect the virus, how testing is performed, and the speed and accuracy of test results. However, there is still a lot we do not know about COVID-19, such as whether people who have had the disease can get it again. It is important to understand the different types of COVID-19 tests and what the test results do and do not mean.

There are two main types of tests:
- **Virus tests**: swab or saliva tests used to identify whether someone **currently** has COVID-19 (i.e., 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**. Antibody tests cannot be used to tell if someone has a current infection with the virus that causes COVID-19.

Virus Tests for Current Infection

How is virus testing done?
A virus test is performed by inserting a swab (similar to a long Q-tip) into your nose or throat, or by collecting saliva. The swab or saliva is then tested for the virus that causes COVID-19.

How long will it take to get my test result?
Usually the swab or saliva sample needs to be sent to a lab. Test results can take several days or longer. Some tests can be run in a health care provider's office, making test results much faster.

How will I get my test result?
Your health care provider will give you your test result.

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

What does a negative virus test result mean?
A **negative** virus test result means that you most likely do **not** have COVID-19. However, like all New Yorkers, you should still stay home as much as possible and practice good hand hygiene and physical distancing, including staying at least 6 feet from others. You must also continue to wear a face covering when outside your home if physical distance cannot be maintained. **This is especially important if you have symptoms of COVID-19 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 and are made in response to an infection. 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 don't 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 antibody testing for COVID-19?
Antibody testing (also called serology testing) for COVID-19 is designed to detect antibodies to the virus that causes COVID-19. 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 may have already had COVID-19. **These tests are important for public health but hard to interpret for personal health, since we don't yet know if the 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 sick or was recently sick. Antibody testing should **not** be performed on someone who currently has symptoms of COVID-19, had symptoms of COVID-19 within the last two weeks, or had a positive virus test (swab or saliva) 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 either through a finger stick or drawing blood from a vein in your arm. Your blood sample will then need to be sent to a lab. Test results usually take several days.

At this time, all antibody tests that have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) must be performed in a laboratory. No antibody tests have been approved for use in a doctor's office.

How long will it take to get my test result?
Test results usually take several days.

How will I get my test result?
The provider who ordered the test is responsible for giving you your test result. If you are tested as part of a New York City public health initiative, you will be provided with information about how to get your test result.

What does a positive antibody test result mean?
A **positive** antibody test result means that antibodies were detected in your blood. This most likely means that you were infected with the virus that causes 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.

A positive test result does not mean you are immune to COVID-19 or that you can't get it again.
Sometimes the antibodies developed in response to an infection protect us from getting that same infection again. **We do not yet know if this is true for COVID-19.** It is important that you continue to follow physical distancing and good hand hygiene recommendations. You must also continue to use a face covering when physical distance cannot be maintained, and use any personal protective equipment recommended by your employer. Do not change these actions based on your test result.

What does a negative antibody test result mean?
A **negative** antibody test result means that antibodies were **not** detected in your blood. This can have several possible meanings. Most likely it means that you have **not** been infected with the virus that causes COVID-19.

However, it could also mean that you were infected with the virus that causes COVID-19 but:
- There has not been enough time for antibodies to develop;
- 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 don't know if you can get COVID-19 again. It is important that you continue to follow physical distancing and good hand hygiene recommendations. You must also continue to use a face covering when physical distance cannot be maintained, and use any personal protective equipment recommended by your employer. Do not change these actions based on your test result.

If I test positive, does that mean my family was exposed to the virus and may have been infected?
Family and other household members are at increased risk of COVID-19 given the nature of shared living space. However, this does not mean your family had the virus. Household members should consult their health care provider if they have questions about testing.

Who should I call if I have questions about my test result?
Call your health care provider who ordered the test. If you are tested as part of a New York City public health initiative, you will be provided a phone number to call with questions.

Will my test result affect whether I can go to work?
No. Whether you have antibodies or not will **not** prevent you from going to work. 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 use the personal protective equipment recommended by your employer regardless of your test result.

What should I do after I get my test result?
We do not yet know if having antibodies to COVID-19 will prevent you from getting it again. Regardless of your antibody test result, it is important to keep taking measures to avoid getting infected and spreading infection.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Follow physical distancing at work and when not at work. Stay home as much as possible and stay at least 6 feet from others when outside your home.
- Wear a face covering when outside your home if physical distance cannot be maintained.
- Monitor your health.
    - Be aware of the symptoms of COVID-19. The most common symptoms are cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fever, muscle pain, chills, sore throat, and new loss of taste or smell. Other symptoms include nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. More information about symptoms is available at nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.
    - Do not go to work if you become sick.
    - More information about what to do when you are sick and when to get emergency care are available at nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.   5.11.20