COVID-19 Testing FAQ

This guidance document will continue to be updated as the COVID-19 situation evolves. Visit www.coronavirusnetwork.org for the latest information, updates and resources.

When should I get tested for COVID-19?

You should get tested for the coronavirus as soon as you begin to feel sick or show symptoms of COVID-19, such as a fever, cough, or muscle aches. In addition, you should also get tested if you have come into contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 or might have COVID-19. If you are not sick and you have not knowingly come into contact with someone with COVID-19, it may not be necessary for you to get a test. However, most states are moving to implement a policy in which anyone who wants to get a test can get one.

How can I get tested for COVID-19?

Testing for COVID-19 is becoming more widely available in the U.S. Most states have drive through testing sites where you can get tested without leaving your car. Testing may also be available at your health care provider’s office or an urgent care center. If you would like to be tested, check with your local or state department of health for locations, or call your doctor or health care provider. Emergency rooms and hospitals also test for COVID-19. However, you should not go to the emergency room or hospital just for testing. Use the ER if you are having trouble breathing or have any other severe symptoms.

How does COVID-19 testing work?

Most COVID-19 testing is done by taking a sample of mucus from deep inside your nose or the back of your throat. A health care provider may take the sample from you or they may show you how to do it and have you give yourself the test. This sample is then tested to look for the coronavirus’ RNA (genetic material). If the RNA is detected, the result is ‘positive.’ This means you have COVID-19, an active infection of coronavirus, and can spread the infection to others.

What does the test feel like?

In most cases, a swab will enter your nose and be turned in circles a few times. This might be uncomfortable or make you feel like gagging. You should not have any lasting pain or discomfort once the swab is removed.

Are the test results accurate?

COVID-19 tests have been approved by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) which says they are accurate enough to be helpful in diagnosing COVID-19. However, they are not perfect. These tests can produce false negative results. This means that
even though someone has COVID-19, the test can come back negative. This can be avoided by getting a good sample and getting tested as soon as you have any symptoms of COVID-19, rather than waiting.

**Is it possible to test negative and have COVID-19?**

Yes. ‘False negative’ outcomes mean you have COVID-19 but test negative. All tests that try to detect various diseases have some false negative rate, although it is small. If you have symptoms, such as cough, fever, and body pain, talk to your health care provider and act like you might have COVID-19. This means you should isolate yourself at home and avoid contact with others. It is always best to protect those around you. To learn more about how to isolate yourself, and for how long, please see this [resource](#).

**If there is no cure, why should I get tested?**

While there is no medication to make COVID-19 go away, your health care provider can give you ideas to help keep your immune system strong to speed up recovery. Getting tested also helps you avoid spreading COVID-19 to other people. If you know you have it, you can stay isolated at home and follow other guidelines that will prevent you from getting others sick. Finally, getting tested can prevent worse problems. If you know you have COVID-19, you can look for signs, such as trouble breathing, which is a sign that it is time to go to a hospital. If you have severe symptoms but test negative for COVID-19, you may need to be tested for other health problems that cause trouble breathing.

**If I test negative, can I go about my normal activities?**

Testing negative does not mean you cannot get COVID-19. If you test negative, you should continue to be careful because you can get it any time. You should continue to wear a face mask in public, maintain 6 feet of distance from others, and wash your hands frequently. This will help keep you from getting COVID-19 and spreading it.

**If I test negative, can I end up positive later?**

Yes. Testing negative means you probably do not have COVID-19 at the time of the test. If you are exposed, you can get sick 2-14 days after being with someone who is infected. If you test negative, but are later exposed to someone with COVID-19, or start having symptoms, you need to get tested again.

**If I test positive once, can I get it again?**

COVID-19 is very new so we do not have enough information to know whether or not it is possible to get COVID-19 again after you have already had it. Based on what we know about other viruses, it is likely your body will develop antibodies against COVID-19 to fight off the virus when you have it. After you recover, these antibodies can protect you from getting it again. We do not know how long these antibodies last or how effective they are at preventing re-infection.

**If I feel fine, should I still get tested?**
It is possible to have COVID-19 and feel fine or have very mild symptoms. If testing is very limited in your area, it may be best to save tests for people who feel sick or people who know they have been exposed. As testing becomes more available, as it already is in many areas right now, the more people who get tested the better. This helps us know how many people have COVID-19. Since you can have the virus without feeling sick, getting tested can help you make sure you do not spread it to other people.

Can I get a test to see if I already had COVID-19, but have since recovered?

Yes. Using a blood sample, health care professionals can do an antibody test. This test shows whether or not you have antibodies in your blood against COVID-19. It does not tell you if you currently have COVID-19 or whether or not you are contagious. Instead, an antibody test tells you whether or not you have had the coronavirus in the past and have since recovered.

What are ‘antibodies’ and what is an antibody test?

When we get sick or are exposed to a disease, our bodies make antibodies to fight off the infections. Antibodies help us get better and keep us from getting the same disease again. Right now, there are several blood tests that can be done to see if someone has antibodies against COVID-19. There are a few problems with this test. First, antibodies cannot be detected until about 1-3 weeks since the start of the infection or having symptoms. This is why this test cannot be used to diagnose an active infection. Some tests can identify antibodies earlier in the infection and can indicate current infection. Second, these tests can have false positives, meaning some people with positive results don’t actually have the antibodies for the coronavirus. Finally, we do not know how long these antibodies last. People with positive results may think they are safe and stop taking precautions when in fact they are not safe.

Information for this FAQ came from:


U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

U.S. Food & Drug Administration:
This FAQ was written by the Coronavirus Support Network, a project of Sostento Inc., a US-based 501c3 federally recognized nonprofit. To join the network visit [www.coronavirusnetwork.org](http://www.coronavirusnetwork.org).

Please note that the guidance in this document does not substitute for the recommendations of your healthcare provider.