



What type of COVID-19 Test Should I Get To See if I Am Infected Now?

There are many types of tests to diagnose a current COVID-19 infection on the market. Do not use an antibody test to see if you are infected now. Each diagnostic test has its own specific specimen collection method and performance in various groups of people. The test should always be conducted following the manufacturer's guidelines. Decisions on which lab test to use (for any condition) and how to interpret the results are best made by a trained healthcare provider, so if you have specific questions about your situation, it is best to check with your healthcare provider if you can.

	PCR / Molecular	Antigen
Use to diagnose COVID-19?	Yes	Yes
How does it work?	PCR tests detect genetic material of the virus (live or dead).	Antigen tests detect proteins that are on the outside of the virus.
When best to use?	PCR tests are more sensitive, but may continue to be positive even after a person is no longer contagious (this is the reason CDC recommends not using a negative test to end isolation - CDC recommends isolation can end 10 days after symptom onset without needing a negative test).	Antigen tests are not as sensitive as PCR, but they can also be used to diagnose COVID-19. They are best used in people with symptoms within a few days of symptom onset or for people who have had a known direct exposure to someone with COVID-19 (wait at least 5 days after exposure).
If you are sick...	PCR can detect even small amounts of virus, alive or dead, and should be positive when you start having symptoms and even a day or two before. It is better at detecting smaller amounts of the virus than the antigen test.	Antigen test can diagnose COVID-19 and is also a good choice if you are ill. The results are much faster (as little as 15 minutes), which can be an important factor in choosing a test.
If you have been exposed to someone with COVID-19...	The best time to test to see if you have been infected is starting 5 days after your exposure. You can get either a PCR/molecular test or an antigen test. But a negative result does not mean you are not infected as it can take up to 14 days for symptoms and a positive test to show up. Current CDC guidance includes an option for a shortened quarantine of 7 days if you get a test on day 5, 6, or 7 and it is negative and you have no symptoms. Another option in the CDC guidance is to quarantine for 10 days without a test. But the safest option is to quarantine for the full 14 days to prevent transmitting the disease to someone else.	
If you are not sick and have not had a direct exposure to someone with COVID-19...	PCR tests are more sensitive, meaning they detect lower levels of virus, so they are better for people who do not have any symptoms and don't have any known exposures.	Antigen tests should be used for people who have symptoms or were directly exposed to someone with COVID-19, so PCR is preferable for this group.
How fast are the results?	PCR/molecular tests are more complex and are usually run in a larger laboratory. It may take several days to get the result. There are some point-of-care molecular tests that are faster and can be done in a medical office.	Antigen tests can be run in a clinic setting and results are usually ready within an hour, maybe as little as a few minutes.
What kind of specimen is needed?	Usually, but not always, PCR test specimens are "nasopharyngeal" which use longer swabs and test cells in the cavity behind your nose. Sometimes PCR can be done on "nasal" (in the nose) specimens (swabs not as long) or even saliva (spit), depending on the brand and type of test.	Antigen tests are usually done on "nasal" (up the nose) specimens (the shorter swabs).

Updated December 4, 2020

Note: These recommendations do not take the place of any public health directed health measures. You should check with your local or state health authority about what measures may be in place.