



# COVID-19 Testing

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<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/acd/ncorona2019/covidtests/>

## COVID-19 TESTING OVERVIEW

- There are different types of COVID-19 tests. Viral tests (NAAT and antigen) are swab or saliva tests that look for current infection. Blood tests, called antibody tests look for past infection. Only viral tests are recommended to see if you are currently infected with COVID-19.
- Some viral tests can be done without being sent to a laboratory – this includes rapid tests, some of which can be done at home ([self-tests](#)).
- It is important to get a COVID-19 test, even if you are [up to date with your COVID-19 vaccines](#)
  - If you develop symptoms<sup>1</sup> of COVID-19
  - If you are a [close contact](#) to someone with COVID-19
  - If you have traveled internationally or to areas in the US where COVID-19 is quickly spreading
  - As an extra layer of protection to protect others from getting sick.

See [When to get a test](#) to learn more about when testing is required or recommended.

- Testing is an important tool to reduce the risk of COVID-19 but testing alone is not enough. To reduce your risk, [stay up to date](#) with your COVID-19 vaccines, wear a mask indoors, avoid crowds and spaces with poor air flow, and if you are at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19, get medicines to prevent or treat COVID-19. Learn more at [ph.lacounty.gov/reducerisk](http://ph.lacounty.gov/reducerisk) and [ph.lacounty.gov/covidmedicines](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidmedicines).
- So far, it appears tests for current infection (e.g., viral tests) continue to work well at detecting COVID-19 infection with the Omicron variant.

## TYPES OF COVID TESTS

**Viral tests** are swab or saliva tests.

- They can show if you have a current infection.
- There are two types of viral tests: antigen tests and nucleic acid amplification tests (NAATs).
- Viral tests can be rapid tests (results in 15-30 min) or laboratory-based tests (that can take 1-3 days for results). Most antigen tests and some NAAT tests are rapid tests.
- There are now several rapid tests that are available over the counter (OTC) for testing yourself at home or anywhere. Most of these are antigen tests. See [self-testing](#) to learn more.
- PCR tests are a type of NAAT test that is usually performed in a laboratory. PCR tests are considered the most accurate test for COVID-19. They are often used to confirm the results of rapid tests.
- NAAT and antigen tests can be used whether you have symptoms or not. There are trade-offs to both kinds of tests. Rapid tests are recommended when you need or want to know your results right away but [false results](#) are a bit more common. More accurate NAATs (usually PCR tests) are recommended to confirm some rapid test results and when a person can wait for the test result; these tests are less likely

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<sup>1</sup> Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after being exposed to the virus and may include: fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath/difficulty breathing, new loss of taste or smell, fatigue, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headache, sore throat, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea. *This list does not include all possible symptoms of COVID-19. Some people with COVID-19 never get symptoms. Visit [ph.lacounty.gov/covidcare](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidcare) to learn more about what to do if you are sick.*



## COVID-19 Tests

to yield a false result. Antigen tests are recommended over NAAT tests when testing to get out of isolation early or if you had COVID-19 in the past 3 months.

- See [Understanding Your Viral Test Result and What to do Next](#) for more information.

**Antibody tests** (also known as [serology tests](#)) are blood tests.

- They might tell you if you had an infection in the past, but they cannot tell you when.
- They should not be used to test for a current infection or to tell if you are protected from getting COVID-19 in the future.

	VIRAL TESTS (swab or saliva tests) Looks for current infection		ANTIBODY TEST (blood tests) Looks for past infection
	NUCLEIC ACID AMPLIFICATION TEST (NAAT) (molecular tests – e.g., PCR and LAMP*)	ANTIGEN TEST	ANTIBODY TEST (serologic tests or serology)
How the test works	Detects genetic material (RNA) <b>within</b> the COVID-19 virus	Detects proteins (or antigens) <b>on the surface</b> of the COVID-19 virus	Detects antibodies made by the immune system
How the test is done	Saliva, or swab from nose or throat	Swab from nose or throat	Blood from arm or finger stick
How long it takes to get results	Same day and up to 3 days. Some are rapid (around 20 minutes)	Most are rapid, around 15 minutes or less.	Same day and up to 3 days
Over the counter self-tests	A few companies make them	Many companies make them	Not available

\*Includes PCR (e.g., Reverse-Transcriptase Polymerase Chain Reaction - RT-PCR) and Loop-Mediated Isothermal Amplification (LAMP)

## WHEN TO GET A TEST

The following information refers to COVID-19 viral tests.

- If you have COVID-19 [symptoms](#).
- If you have been a close contact<sup>2</sup> to someone with COVID-19. See [ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts).
- If you have COVID-19, to see if you can end isolation early. See [ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation).
- Before and after travel. See CDC [Travel](#) for current recommendations.
- Before or after attending a gathering or event.
- For screening (schools, workplaces, venues, etc.).
- If recommended by a healthcare professional or Public Health.

Note: There may be other settings that have their own testing requirements.

<sup>2</sup> You are a “close contact” if you were exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID-19 while they were infectious (2 days before their symptoms began or 2 days before they tested positive if they don’t have symptoms, until their isolation period ends).

Exposed means you shared the same indoor airspace with the person with COVID-19 for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period. Examples of indoor airspaces are homes, waiting rooms, airplanes. An example of ‘a total of 15 minutes or more’ is being in the same airspace with the person for 5 minutes at least 3 different times in 24 hours. Tested positive means they had a positive COVID-19 viral test (swab or saliva) test.

## COVID-19 Tests

If you had COVID-19 within the last 90 days<sup>3</sup> and recovered, testing is usually not recommended unless you have symptoms. If you currently have COVID-19 and are testing to get out of isolation early, an antigen test is recommended.

### Understanding Your Viral Test Results and What to do Next

Talk with your doctor to make sure you understand what your viral test result means and any next steps. If you took a self-test and need advice about what to do next, you can also call the DPH COVID-19 information line at 1-833-540-0473.

SUMMARY: VIRAL TESTS - WHAT A RESULT MEANS		
	NUCLEIC ACID AMPLIFICATION TEST (NAAT)	ANTIGEN TEST
Positive Result*	A <b>positive</b> result means the test found the COVID-19 virus. It is very likely you have COVID-19. You need to follow <a href="#">isolation instructions</a> .	A <b>positive</b> result means the test found the COVID-19 virus proteins. It is very likely you have COVID-19. You need to follow <a href="#">isolation instructions</a> .
Negative Result*	A <b>negative</b> result means that the virus that causes COVID-19 was not found.	A <b>negative</b> result means that COVID-19 virus proteins were not found. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>If you have COVID-19 symptoms, it is recommended that you get another test a day or two later (antigen or NAAT) because antigen tests are more likely to miss early infections.</li></ul>

\*No test for COVID-19 is perfect. Any test may produce:

- False negative results
  - This means that the test result comes back negative even though you DO have COVID-19.
  - This may happen, for example, if the sample was not collected properly, the test procedure was not correctly followed, the test was taken too soon, or the test didn't perform well.
- False positive results
  - This means that the test result comes back positive even though you DO NOT have COVID-19.
  - This may happen, for example, if the test procedure was not followed correctly or the test didn't perform well.

### YOUR COVID-19 TEST WAS POSITIVE (POS)

The test detected the COVID-19 virus. It is very likely you have COVID-19 and could spread it to others. See below for instructions on what to do next based on your situation.

#### *If you have symptoms of COVID-19*

- **Isolate<sup>4</sup> stay home away from others** and follow instruction: [ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation](https://ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation).

<sup>3</sup> This means you had a positive viral test in the past 90 days and recovered. Recovered means you have completed [isolation](#).

<sup>4</sup> If you have COVID-19, you must stay home and away from others. [Stay away](#) from household members. Do not go to work, school, or public areas. If you must leave home to get essential medical care, drive yourself, if possible. If you cannot drive yourself sit in the back seat, leave the windows down, and wear a mask. Call the COVID Info line 833-540-0473 if you are experiencing homelessness, or you are unable to safely isolate or quarantine at home. Open daily 8:00am–8:30pm. Tell your close contacts, including your workplace or school, that you have COVID-19 so they can tell others to quarantine or test as needed. Learn more about isolation at [ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation](https://ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation).

## COVID-19 Tests

- **Tell all of your [close contacts](#) that they have been exposed:** give them the Instructions for Close Contacts available at [ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts).
- **Answer the call from LA Public Health:** Help slow the spread of COVID-19 by answering if you get a call from "LA Public Health" or (833) 641-0305. You can also call (833) 540-0473.
- If you did a home/self-test and have questions about isolation or you need referrals/resources or help to notify your contacts, call the DPH COVID-19 information line at 1-833-540-0473.

**Important:** If you are at [high risk](#) for getting very sick from COVID-19 you may be able to get medicine to help keep you out of the hospital. Contact a doctor right away even if your symptoms are mild. Don't delay: the medicines work best when they are given as soon as possible after symptoms start. See [ph.lacounty.gov/covidmedicines](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidmedicines) for more information.

### ***If you don't have symptoms of COVID-19***

- **Isolate - stay home away from others and follow instructions:** [ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidisolation).
- **Tell all of your [close contacts](#) that they have been exposed:** give them the Instructions for Close Contacts available at [ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts).
- **Answer the call from LA Public Health:** Help slow the spread of COVID-19 by answering if you get a call from "LA Public Health" or (833) 641-0305. You can also call (833) 540-0473.
- If you did a home/self-test and have questions about isolation or you need referrals/resources or help to notify your contacts, call the DPH COVID-19 information line at 1-833-540-0473.

**Important:** If you are at [high risk](#) for getting very sick from COVID-19 you may be able to get medicine to help keep you out of the hospital. If you develop any symptoms, even if they are very mild, contact a doctor right away. Don't delay: the medicines work best when they are given as soon as possible after symptoms start. See [ph.lacounty.gov/covidmedicines](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidmedicines) for more information.

## YOUR COVID-19 TEST WAS NEGATIVE (NEG)

A negative COVID-19 result means the test did NOT detect the COVID-19 virus at the time you took the test. See below for instructions on what to do next based on your situation.

### ***If you have symptoms of COVID-19***

**Important note:** If you have been in [close contact](#) to a person with COVID-19 within the past 10 days, these instructions do not apply to you. Please follow *Instructions for Close Contacts* at [ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts](http://ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts).

It is possible that the test is wrong and that you are infected. This can happen for many different reasons including if the test is taken too early, if your specimen sample wasn't collected well, or if the amount of virus was too low to be detected by the test.

**If you have symptoms AND you have a negative test,** stay home until at least\*:

- You have been fever-free 24 hours without the help of fever-reducing medicines

\*If your negative test is an antigen test and/or self-test, it is recommended that you keep staying away from others and get another test a day or two later. This is because these tests are more likely to miss early infections. If it is a self-test, make sure you read and follow all test instructions correctly.

## COVID-19 Tests

*Note: Even with a negative test, your doctor may still diagnose you with COVID-19, based on your history, symptoms, and your physical examination (if done).*

### **If you don't have symptoms of COVID-19**

**Important note:** If you have been in [close contact](#) to a person with COVID-19 within the past 10 days, these instructions do not apply to you. Please follow *Instructions for Close Contacts* at [ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts](https://ph.lacounty.gov/covidcontacts).

**If you have no symptoms and you are not a close contact**, it is unlikely you have COVID-19\*.

- Keep safe and help prevent the spread of COVID. See [Reducing Risk](#) for information.

\*If your negative test was a self-test, make sure you read and follow all test instructions correctly. Some self-tests are designed to be used in a series (also known as serial testing). Multiple negative tests increase the confidence that you are not infected with the virus that causes COVID-19.

## TESTING FOR PAST INFECTION: ANITBODY TESTS (serology)

COVID-19 antibody tests (also known as serology tests) are blood tests that are used to look for antibodies to SARS-COV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19). If we get COVID-19 or a COVID-19 vaccine our body's immune system responds. It makes antibodies and prepares our immune cells to be ready to fight the virus in the future.

COVID-19 antibody tests do not look for the actual SARS-CoV-2 virus itself. They can be used to help figure out if someone was infected with COVID-19 in the past. It takes about one to three weeks after becoming infected for the body to make enough antibodies to be found by a test. Some people may take even longer, and some people who were infected with COVID-19 may never develop antibodies. NONE of the currently authorized tests are [recommended](#) to see if people have been successfully vaccinated against COVID-19.

*When COVID-19 antibody tests may be useful*

There are situations where antibody tests may be helpful. For example:

- Doctors may order antibody tests (in addition to viral tests) for patients with a complicated illness that is difficult to diagnose.
- Public health organizations may use antibody tests to learn more about how the virus has spread in a community.
- Scientists may use antibody tests for research.

*COVID-19 antibody tests cannot tell a person:*

- When or if they definitely had COVID-19
- Whether or not they are protected (immune) from COVID-19
- Whether it is safe to travel or spend time with other people
- Whether they need to isolate or quarantine
- Whether they should or should not get vaccinated
- Whether or not their vaccine is working.

We do not know yet if having antibodies to the COVID-19 virus can protect someone from getting infected again or, if it does, how long that protection (immunity) might last. Even if you had a positive antibody test, you should

## COVID-19 Tests

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continue to [practice everyday prevention](#) to protect yourself and others. The vaccine is the best way to protect yourself from COVID-19.

Antibody tests are not 100% accurate, so false positives and negatives may occur. Talk to your doctor before being tested for antibodies. Your doctor can help you decide if you should be tested and if you are tested, tell you what your results mean. To learn more about using antibody tests to look for past infection, visit the [CDC webpage](#).

### MORE INFORMATION

- **CDC COVID-19 Testing:** [webpage](#) with links to pages on types of tests and FAQs
- **FDA Coronavirus Basics:** [webpage](#) explains the different types of tests, and how they are performed and approved.

