## Types of COVID-19 Tests and When to Use Them

COVID-19 testing should be combined with safety measures such as masking and social distancing.

### Test at the Health Care Provider’s Office or Testing Site

**Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) Test Nasal Swab**

- **What is it?** This test looks for the virus’ genetic material (RNA) in a patient’s sample. A sample is collected by inserting a swab into a person’s nostril and taking cells from the back of the nose. Some lab tests allow for patients to spit into a tube to get a saliva sample.
- **When should you take this test?** Make an appointment with your health care provider if you have been exposed or if you are experiencing symptoms.
- **When can you expect results and how accurate will they be?** Depending on the lab your provider uses, you can expect to receive your results within 24–72 hours. The PCR test is the gold standard when it comes to COVID-19 testing.

### At-Home Types of Tests

**At-Home Nasal Swab with Lab-Based PCR Test**

- **What is it?** This is a similar type of test used at the health care provider’s office, but you collect the nasal swab yourself and mail it to a laboratory to be analyzed.
- **When should you use this test?** Use this test after an exposure or when you begin experiencing symptoms. Test is collected at home but the sample is analyzed at your healthcare provider’s office or a local testing site.
- **When can you expect results and how accurate will they be?** At-home tests can typically take anywhere between two to four days for results. Since these tests are PCR tests performed in a laboratory, these results have a higher accuracy than at-home antigen tests.

**Saliva PCR Test**

- **What is it?** This is a similar type of test used at the health care provider’s office, but you collect the saliva sample yourself and mail it off to a laboratory to be analyzed. Similar to swab tests, saliva is a specimen that can be collected for PCR testing. Saliva is typically easier — and more comfortable — to collect from a patient, compared to a nasopharyngeal swab.
- **When should you use this test?** Use this test after an exposure or when you begin experiencing symptoms.
- **When can you expect results and how accurate will they be?** At-home mail away tests can typically take anywhere between two to four days for results. Since these tests are PCR tests performed in a laboratory, these results have a higher accuracy than at-home antigen tests.

**Rapid at-Home Antigen Tests**

- **What is it?** The rapid at-home antigen tests detect a viral protein in the nasal sample.
- **When should you use this test?** Use this test when attending at gathering or event (take the test the day of event); after an exposure; when you begin to experience symptoms; and this may be used in some situations to return to work.
- **How does this test produce results?** Using a nasal swab, antigen tests can produce results in 15 minutes.
- **When can you expect results and how accurate will they be?** These tests are available for purchase where at-home tests are sold. These tests are faster and less expensive than PCR tests, but there is an increased chance of false-negative results. If an at-home antigen test is negative, continue to wear a mask in public settings, around those who are unvaccinated and/or high-risk. If you have symptoms and an at-home test is positive, contact your health care provider to see if you need treatment. A follow-up PCR might also be recommended to ensure your case is tracked by public health officials.