



Information Sheet D: The role of testing for COVID-19

Types of testing

There are two main types of test:

1. Testing for the virus – this uses a nose and throat swab to pick up any virus. It is the kind of test available free through the NHS at a walk-through or drive-through testing centre. If you cannot get to a testing centre, you can arrange a postal home test. It is also the test provided for care homes.
2. Testing for antibodies – this is a blood test and is not routinely offered to members of the public. It is being offered to some NHS and social care staff. This information sheet is about virus tests. See Information Sheet F for more details about antibody tests.

What does a positive virus test mean?

A positive virus test means that you have COVID-19. If you are an older person in a care home, you must self-isolate for 14 days from the first day of your symptoms (or from the date of the test, if you don't have symptoms). After that, if you feel well and don't have a fever, you will not be infectious any more.

If you are a not an older person in a care home, you must self-isolate for 10 days from the first day of your symptoms (or from the date of the test, if you don't have symptoms). After that, if you feel well and don't have a fever, you can stop isolating.

What does a negative virus test mean?

A negative virus test means that you did not have COVID-19 at the time of the test. It doesn't mean that you haven't picked up COVID-19. It can take up to 14 days for you to develop the infection after being in contact with an infected person.

Why can't I get a test instead of self-isolating?

If you have been in contact with an infected person, it can take up to 14 days for you to develop COVID-19 yourself. This is the incubation period. The virus test can only tell if you have the actual virus, not if you are incubating the disease. So, you may get a negative test one day, but then develop COVID-19 the next day. This is why you need to finish the 14-day self-isolation, even if you get a negative test.

Repeat testing

There is no need for repeat testing before stopping isolation. Ten to fourteen days after getting symptoms (or having a positive test), most people with COVID-19 are not able to pass the infection to others. So it is safe for them to stop isolating, as long as they feel well and have no fever.

Some people can still show up as positive on a virus test after this time, even though they cannot infect others. This makes interpreting testing results more difficult in care homes where regular staff and resident testing is done. Care homes can contact their local Health Protection Team to discuss their testing results.