



SAFER

COVID-19 Testing Guidance: What You Need to Know

COVID-19 cases have caused a high demand for tests in many communities. Workplace testing is important for employers to help determine whether or not someone should be coming into a physical workspace with other people. This document provides guidance on different types of testing, the importance of testing, testing recommendations and more.

Types of Testing

Testing for COVID-19 can detect either SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, or antibodies your body makes after getting COVID-19 or being vaccinated. There are two types of tests:

- **Viral tests** determine if someone is infected with SARS-CoV-2 using samples from the nose or mouth. The two types of viral tests are molecular and antigen. Antigen tests, often called “rapid” tests, don’t require laboratory processing and typically yield results in 15 minutes, making them a convenient option for testing at home or in the workplace. Rapid tests are generally less sensitive than molecular tests, meaning they are more prone to false-negative results. If a person is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, or has been exposed to COVID-19 by a close contact, it is appropriate to [confirm results](#) using a more sensitive molecular test, known as Nucleic Acid Amplification Tests (NAATs). Most NAATs, such as Reverse Transcription-Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR), require laboratory processing, and it may take one to two days to receive results.
- **Antibody tests** can detect antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 in a person’s blood. Antibody tests should not be used to diagnose a current infection, but may indicate past infections.

Reasons for Testing

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [recommends](#) individuals with COVID-19 symptoms get tested at least five days after known or suspected exposure to COVID-19, before and after travel, or for screening purposes. Employers are encouraged to test unvaccinated individuals for infection at least once a week.

After a positive test, the CDC recommends the person isolates for five days (day one is the first full day after symptoms develop). After a five-day isolation period, if the person has no fever or other COVID-19 symptoms, they can resume activities as usual if they are able to wear well-fitting masks around others at work, home and in public for five additional days. If the employee is fever-free and has access to a rapid antigen test, the [safest approach](#) is to retest after the first five days of isolation. When it is safe to end the isolation period, the individual should wear well-fitting masks around others for five days. During that time, the mask should not be removed in the presence of others. For example, employees returning to work after an isolation period should avoid eating and drinking in common areas, such as shared break rooms.

Testing Results

If one is exposed to COVID-19, but tests negative for the virus, one should not assume they are COVID-19 free. This person could test negative and still have the virus if they are in the early stages of infection. Following a negative test, that individual should continue to watch for symptoms such as cough, shortness of breath, loss of sense of taste or smell, muscle pain, etc.

Genetic mutations in the virus that causes COVID-19 can also complicate testing, potentially increasing the likelihood of false-negative results. Evidence suggests that antigen tests may be [less sensitive](#) in detecting the Omicron variant, potentially leading to more frequent false-negative results since Omicron became the dominant strain in the U.S. If a person has COVID-19 symptoms and tests negative using a rapid antigen test, it's [recommended](#) they get a molecular test (NAAT) to confirm the result. Follow-up NAATs are not necessary to confirm positive rapid test results when a person is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms since false-positives are extremely rare.

Employer Recommendations

The National Safety Council recommends employers continue to act in accordance with recommendations previously released through the *SAFER* initiative, including:

- 1. Have a testing procedure in place**
 - a. Determine how often to test workers. Will your business require all workers to get tested weekly? Will vaccination status be a factor in testing requirements?
 - b. Determine how workers will receive tests. Will you provide at-home tests, or will workers have to make appointments to get tested? How can your business help remove barriers to getting workers to testing appointments?
 - c. Define follow-up procedures after negative test results. What follow-up procedure will be used if a worker experiences COVID-19 symptoms but tests negative? What if they test negative following a confirmed exposure?

2. Test workers regularly

- a. Regular testing can be an important way to detect COVID-19 in people before it can spread through a workforce. Unvaccinated workers should be tested once a week to detect any positive cases. Even when workers are vaccinated, it's still a good idea to test before travel, or after experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms.
- b. Require workers to get a COVID-19 test before coming to work if they've been in close contact with someone who has been ill, or if they experience COVID-19 symptoms. Provide at-home test kits for your workforce or partner with a local testing site to regularly test workers when they may be ill, and consider a follow-up PCR test to confirm negative results.

3. Follow CDC recommendations with regard to isolation periods and symptoms

- a. When an individual's COVID-19 test comes back positive, they should isolate for five days and continue to monitor symptoms. After the five-day isolation period, the person can return to work wearing a well-fitting mask if they aren't experiencing a fever. After the five-day isolation period, employers can consider retesting the worker before allowing them to return to work based on the risk of exposure and work environment. When returning to work, they should continue to mask around others for another five days.
- b. When experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, an individual should take a test to determine whether or not they have the virus. Keep in mind that sometimes a test may come back as a false-negative. If the person is experiencing symptoms, they should take another test to be sure they are negative. They can also continue to mask and social distance.

4. Continue to encourage, or require, vaccines and boosters

- a. Remove barriers to getting tested by implementing on-site vaccination clinics, offering Paid Time Off (PTO) for employees to get tested or for recovery time, providing vaccine education in different languages, etc.
- b. Encourage and/or require vaccines for employees. Boosters can be added to vaccine requirement policy language by requiring them to be "fully vaccinated."
- c. Verify workers' vaccination status. If possible, use secure and private methods, such as electronic databases or mobile applications.

5. Consider continuing to enforce masking for workers

- a. Implement masking policies to protect workers from COVID-19 based on the [COVID-19 Community Level](#) in your area.
- b. Consider implementing masks when workers are near each other and working indoors.