

Frequently Asked Questions

SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) Antibody Testing Programme Roll-out for NHS staff and patients

As a significant provider of healthcare and a large employer of staff, we have been asked by the Department of Health and Social care (DHSC) to support patients and staff to have a blood test as part of an antibody testing programme. This programme is part of a larger surveillance approach to the UK Government's plan to 'test track and trace'. It is **not**, however, a test to see if you or the patient has COVID-19; but whether you or the patient has been exposed to COVID-19 and developed antibodies.

There is so much we have to learn about the acquisition and management of the virus, that we do not have any definitive answers on what a person's antibody status means. Acquiring this level of information will help to build that knowledge and we are confident that more information will become available over time.

What is the antibody test for?

This is a national antibody testing program set up by NHS England to help understand about levels of COVID-19 in different parts of the country, how the disease spreads and how we can reduce spread.

Antibodies are proteins made by the immune system in response to infections. Antibodies often assist in the body's 'fight' against infection, and in many cases, they prevent re-infection occurring. This is a voluntary blood test to see whether or not people have been exposed to COVID-19. We will need to report to the DHSC) the total number of NHS staff tested and the number of results that are positive for COVID-19 antibodies; but we are not be asked to report any data about individuals.

How will patients and staff know about the test?

We have given patients and staff an information leaflet to explain about the test and its result. This provides information about what a positive result means, what a negative result means, and why we should all continue to follow guidance about social distancing and other means to prevent spread of infection. This leaflet provides additional information with more detail that both patients and staff may find helpful.

Which patients can have the test and how will they get their result?

We have been doing the test in hospital in-patients, and we will widen it out to other categories of patients. It will be available across Greater Manchester and regionally. Patients will get their result from the team looking after them, within about 48 hours of the blood test. At the present time, the result of the test should not be used to influence clinical decision-making, because we don't know the significance of a positive or a negative result (see below).

Does it have to be a doctor who gives the test results?

Medical staff are responsible for communication of test results to patients under their care. For staff, the result will be delivered by text message if you have given us a mobile number. If you do not have a mobile telephone we will discuss other options for getting your result with you. It may take up to a week for your result to be communicated to you.

Please DO NOT telephone the lab for your result.

Which staff can have the test?

We will roll it out to all our staff in a phased way (including those not directly employed by us); including staff working in the community and staff working from home. All our testing areas will be appropriately socially-distanced.

How do staff arrange to have the test?

Communication on how to book a test will be available via the intranet. You will be able to telephone and book an appointment.

Risks and Benefits

Are there any risks to having the test?

There are some risks related to having a blood test, such as feeling dizzy and faint during and after the test but nothing specific to this antibody test. Risks can also include bruising at the venepuncture site. Serious complications such as an infection at the site where blood was taken and phlebitis (swelling of the vein) are possible but generally extremely unlikely.

Are there any benefits to having the test?

The test will only show if you have been exposed to the virus or not

How will staff get their test results?

In the first instance it will take up to a week to get results out to staff. Once the new system is up and running, staff will get a text message alert with their result (we will arrange alternative means of communicating with staff that don't have a mobile phone).

The results of the staff test will not go on their employment record, but (as with other blood tests) the result will be available in the laboratory reporting system and accessible to the staff member's GP and Occupational Health.

If you were not tested on an NCA site we will not be able to provide you with your result.

Is this a test for COVID-19?

No, this is not a test for whether you have COVID-19 right now – that is a different test and is done by a swab. The blood test is to see whether you have made any antibodies to the virus.

How will this information be used?

The number of antibody blood tests performed, and the number of positive results, will be reported to DHSC. This national antibody testing program set up by NHS England will help to understand about levels of COVID-19 in different parts of the country, how the disease spreads and how we can reduce spread.

If the test result comes back positive, what does that mean?

A positive result in this test means you have antibodies in your blood. This means that you have had the virus. For 80% of people who have actually had the virus, this test will confirm that you have had COVID-19 and have developed antibodies to the virus.

What if my test result comes back positive and I didn't know I'd ever had COVID-19?

Antibodies mean that you have had COVID-19 at some time but currently we do not know what this means for your future care. It may have been a very mild infection and you may not have been aware that you had COVID-19. It is perfectly possible to have had the virus without symptoms, or with only very mild symptoms. You do not need to do anything further but must continue to follow the guidance issued by Public Health England.

What is the false positive rate of the test – how often will a 'positive' result actually be wrong?

This is a very accurate test; the number of false positive results is less than 1%.

Does having antibodies mean I am immune?

COVID-19 is such a recent disease globally that nobody yet knows the answer to this question. We do not know if having antibodies means you cannot get the virus again. Therefore people should not confuse 'having antibodies' with 'being immune'.

Am I still able to transmit the virus to other people?

Even people with antibodies must assume they are capable of infecting others. Therefore, you must continue to follow the Public Health England (PHE) guidance on social distancing and isolation.

When would the antibodies have been made?

People start to make antibodies after about 5 days of being infected. The peak time for making the antibodies is not yet completely defined but is likely at or after 21 days.

How long will the antibodies last?

Antibodies last for weeks to months, but we don't know exactly how long they last after COVID-19.

What if I have had a swab that was negative, but my antibody test has come back positive?

The antibody test is very accurate. It is possible that either you were not infected at the time the swab was taken, or the swab did not detect the virus.

If my test comes back negative, what does that mean?

A negative result means that the test has not detected antibodies to COVID-19 in your blood. Based on this test result, we do not know if you have had COVID-19 infection. A negative test means one of these options:

1. You have never had the infection, or
2. You have had the infection but have not produced antibodies against the virus, or
3. You have had the infection but the antibodies that you produced were not detected by this test

What if I have had a swab confirming I had COVID-19, but my antibody test is negative?

It is possible to have had COVID-19, and not have detectable antibodies on this test. It is thought that in up to 20% of people with confirmed COVID-19 infection, we will not be able to detect antibodies in their blood and they will have a negative result on this blood test.

We do not know if this is due to the person not making any antibody at all, or just that this test has not been able to detect the antibody that the person has made (this is the difference between 'biological lack of antibody' versus 'analytical failure of detection').

Is this test a one-off or will it be repeated?

At present there is no need to repeat if the test is positive. There will be guidance coming from the DHSC about when it will, or won't, be appropriate to repeat a negative test.

A staff testing Helpline is available for support please call

Salford - 0161 789 7373

North East Sector (Pennine) – 0161 624 0420

Regardless of the result, we ask that patients and staff continue to follow the Public Health England guidelines about hand washing, social distancing and other measures to prevent spread of infection. You must follow Public Health England and your employer's guidance if you think that you or a member of your family may have the virus.

Relevant links

The government has provided advice on antibody testing:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-antibody-tests/coronavirus-covid-19-antibody-tests>

The Government's advice on distancing and isolation:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing-and>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>