COVID-19 Antibody Blood Test Information for Relatives

What test should I get if I’m worried that I have COVID-19?

The only recommended test to decide if someone has COVID-19 is a nasal swab test. If you are not feeling well, this test can tell right away if you are sick with COVID-19. The nasal swab test detects the virus in the back of your nose, the place where the virus grows well in your body.

Is there another test for COVID-19?

You may have heard about another test for COVID-19. This test is a blood test that looks to see if your body is fighting off the virus. Your body’s immune system produces antibodies to fight off the virus. This blood test is also called an antibody test or antibody blood test.

The antibody test is not recommended to decide if someone has COVID-19 because it takes your body a few weeks to produce enough antibodies in your blood for the test to detect them. By the time your body is producing enough antibodies for a blood test to detect, you may have been sick for a couple of weeks and/or you may already feel better. The nasal swab test is much faster and can be done as soon as you start to not feel well (or even if you feel okay but have been exposed to someone with COVID-19). Also, a negative antibody test cannot be used to tell if someone did not have COVID-19. A negative antibody test can be negative because you have a current COVID-19 infection and antibodies have not had time to develop.

Currently, there are conflicting recommendations on the use of the antibody test to decide if someone has experienced a past infection with COVID-19. Some state health departments do not recommend that antibody tests be used for this purpose. The CDC and FDA believe they can be used to identify people exposed to the virus or who have recovered from COVID-19 infection provided the test has FDA approval and is done in a specialized laboratory.

The FDA notes that many test developers are falsely claiming their serological tests are FDA approved. Doctors and nurses are most worried because since the test is not accurate, the test may tell someone they have experienced a past infection when they did not. It is also not clear if the antibodies the test is detecting are only for the virus that causes COVID-19 or if they may be antibodies for other viruses, like colds.
There are also many things doctors and nurses do not know about COVID-19 disease yet that make it hard to know what a positive antibody test means. They do not know if the antibodies your body produces after being infected are enough to prevent you from getting COVID-19 again or what amount of antibodies are needed to prevent you from getting COVID-19 again. If the antibodies are enough to protect you from getting COVID-19 again, they do not know how long that protection will last. They also do not know the best time after you got sick with the virus to test your blood to look for antibodies.

What are antibody tests used for?
Right now, antibody tests are being used in large communities of people. In these large groups of people, the antibody tests are being used to answer questions about how many people in a community were infected with the virus and had symptoms, how many people in the community were infected with the virus and did not have symptoms, and how long the antibodies protect people from COVID-19.

What information do we still need to know about the antibody test?
As more testing is done of the antibody blood tests for the virus, it will become clearer if and when this test will be useful for people. Once testing shows if antibodies to the virus are enough to prevent you from getting COVID-19 again and for how long, the antibody blood test may be a more useful test to get. It may also be useful if testing shows that there were many people who did not have symptoms and have antibodies. The Urban Indian Health Institute will update this factsheet as more information becomes available about antibody blood testing.

References