



What do I need to know about COVID tests?



What COVID test options are available?

There are 2 main types of test that can tell you if you have a COVID infection:

A **polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test** checks for viral genetic material. A PCR sample is collected from the mouth, nose, or throat. The sample is usually collected by a health professional and tested at a lab. PCR tests are very reliable. They can stay positive for weeks or months after an infection.

A **rapid antigen test (RAT)** is a do-it-yourself test that checks for viral proteins. For the most accurate result, swab inside each of your cheeks, then your throat, and then each nostril. For instructions, visit <https://www.ontariohealth.ca/covid-19/health-system-response-resources/rapid-antigen-testing>.

The result is ready in about 15 minutes. RATs are less reliable than PCR tests so repeat testing is recommended if you have COVID symptoms. In general, RATs stay positive during the time when you can spread COVID.



If you have COVID symptoms, self-isolate and take extra precautions when your isolation ends. Read more about what to do if you feel sick or have a positive COVID test here: rebrand.ly/Feeling-Unwell.

Some people with COVID may benefit from medications that lower the risk of serious illness. To learn more about COVID treatments, see: rebrand.ly/COVID-medications.

Who can get a PCR test?

In Ontario, PCR tests can only be used in certain situations. You can get a PCR test if:

- 1. You have COVID symptoms and are at higher risk of serious illness.** This includes:
 - » People 70 years old and older;
 - » People 60 years old and older who have had 0, 1, or 2 doses of a COVID vaccine;
 - » People who have a weakened immune system e.g. Common Variable Immunodeficiency (CVID), cancer chemotherapy or high-dose steroid treatment;
 - » People 18 years old and older who have had 0, 1, or 2 doses of a COVID vaccine and have other health conditions that increase the risk of serious illness (e.g. diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, lung disease, heart disease, heart failure, serious liver or kidney problems, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, sickle cell disease);
 - » Pregnant people.

- 2. You have COVID symptoms and you work with people who may be at higher risk of serious illness.** You can get a PCR test if you:
 - » Are a patient-facing healthcare worker;
 - » Work, volunteer, or live in a highest-risk setting e.g. hospitals, congregate living settings for medically and socially vulnerable people
 - » Live with a patient-facing healthcare worker or someone who works in a highest-risk setting;
 - » Are a first responder;
 - » Are a home and community-care worker;
 - » Work in or attend Provincial and Demonstration Schools;
 - » Are an international agriculture worker living in a group setting;
 - » Are underhoused or experiencing homelessness.

- 3. You identify as First Nation, Inuit or Métis community, or live in or are traveling to a First Nation, Inuit or Métis community;**

- 4. Your healthcare provider has instructed you to get a PCR test** (e.g. before surgery or a medical or dental procedure);

- 5. Public Health has instructed you to get a PCR test** as part of an outbreak investigation.

COVID centres and emergency rooms are not able to give you a PCR test if you do not meet the criteria.

When can RATs be used?

There are 4 main uses for RATs:

01 Testing when you have symptoms:

If you have symptoms, **a positive RAT confirms that you have COVID.**

If you have symptoms, **a negative RAT does not mean that you don't have COVID.** You should do at least 2 RATs at least 24 hours apart. 2 negative RATs collected at least 24 hours apart mean that there is a lower chance that you have COVID.

Whether you have a positive or negative COVID test, if you have COVID symptoms, self-isolate and take extra precautions once your isolation has ended. Read more about what to do if you feel sick or have a positive COVID test here: rebrand.ly/Feeling-Unwell.



02 As part of an organized program:

Some settings, like long-term care homes and hospitals, are using RATs to reduce the risk of COVID spread. In these settings, people who don't have COVID symptoms use RATs regularly to detect the virus early. Read more about what to do if you have a positive COVID test here: rebrand.ly/Feeling-Unwell.

If you are part of a screening program and you get COVID, you can start screening again with RATs 90 days after you tested positive.

03 Testing to return to work or end isolation:

People with COVID can spread it for up to 10 days. RATs are sometimes used to help determine if someone returning to work is no longer contagious. Follow your workplace's guidance to go back to work after a COVID infection.

Similarly, some people use RATs to guide decisions about ending isolation. If you are able, self-isolating for 10 days OR until you have taken 2 negative RATs at least 24 hours apart will lower the risk of spreading COVID. You should take extra precautions for 10 days after a COVID infection. Learn more about what to do if you have COVID here: rebrand.ly/Feeling-Unwell.

04 One-time testing when you feel well:

Using RATs before social gatherings may lower the risk of spreading COVID. It is important to know that RATs are not perfect. You can test negative and still be contagious.



If you don't have symptoms, take the test right before you gather, and collect a good specimen so that you can be most confident in the result.

If you have COVID symptoms, self-isolate and take extra precautions when your isolation ends.

Remember: While COVID continues to be common in Ontario, there are things you can do to protect yourself and others.

- ✓ Get all vaccine doses that are recommended for you.
- ✓ If you feel sick, stay home.
- ✓ Wear a well-fitted mask in indoor public spaces.
- ✓ Gather outdoors whenever possible.
- ✓ Breathe clean air: open windows, keep the furnace fan "on", and use air filters