How fast should I expect to get my COVID-19 tests?

There are two basic types of COVID-19 test being used by clinics and laboratories, a rapid test, and a more traditional test performed in a medical laboratory. Rapid tests are now available in many clinics and can give results in as little as 15 minutes. Traditional laboratory tests can take 2-3 days or sometimes longer, depending on how busy the laboratory is. Laboratory tests almost exclusively use a technology called "PCR" which is the gold standard in COVID-19 detection. Rapid tests can be either PCR or antigen testing. While antigen tests look for proteins on the surface of the virus to ascertain the presence of the pathogen, PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests are engineered to seek genetic material called RNA that instructs the virus to make these proteins. PCR tests are slightly more accurate than antigen testing.

A third type of testing called antibody testing is not useful when diagnosing for the COVID-19 virus. There is often confusion between antigen testing and antibody testing. Antigen testing can be used to diagnose a COVID case; antibody testing can't.

When it comes to diagnosing COVID-19, which is more effective: a nasal or throat swab test or saliva test?

PCR tests may take samples from different areas, but all work the same way. A swab is used to collect mucus from the nose or throat, which is then tested to see if it contains any genetic material of the virus. Since the beginning of the pandemic, COVID-19 nasal swab testing has been the most common way test specimens are collected. COVID-19 saliva testing has recently become available in some locations, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved it for emergency use. The type of specimen taken will depend on the laboratory being used and the technology that the laboratory uses to process the specimen.

Have 'At-home' COVID-19 tests been approved and are they effective?

At-home collection tests have recently come on the market that allow the patient to collect the sample at home and send it directly to the lab for analysis. Some at-home collection tests have a health care provider oversee the sample collection by video with the patient. The Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved a saliva at-home collection kit that can be ordered online for emergency use from third-party retailers. However, please contact your medical provider on best course to take. At- home testing kits that are approved by the FDA may be reimbursable through your health care flexible saving account or your health plan.

Can my child get a COVID-19 rapid test?

Children of all ages can get tested for COVID-19. CDC testing recommendations are the same for children and adults. Talk to your child's pediatrician if you have any specific concerns about testing.

Do I need a Doctor's Order to get a COVID-19 test?

No. Pre-approval by a physician is not required to get a COVID-19 test. Some health plans do a pre-test review (either electronically or by phone) before permitting you to sign up for a COVID-19 test, but a physician's order is not required.

If I need to take a test where should I go for one?

The best way to get a COVID-19 test is to contact your health care provider. It is okay to go to your local pharmacy and get a test if it is available. You can also go to your local county's website to look for other appropriate testing sites. PG&E covers the cost of COVID-19 testing under our health plans. If you get the test outside of the health plan, you may need to request reimbursement through Concur.

What Is a Drive-Thru Testing Site?

A drive-thru testing site is a place where you remain in your car while a health care provider does a test. Some drive-thru sites do testing by appointment only, so be sure to check the instructions for the specific site you plan to go to, in order to determine if an appointment is required.

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- Determine if you need to bring a paper Doctor's order for the test. If an order is required, it may be transmitted by the doctor's office or you may have to take it along.
- People working at the site will direct you in your vehicle when you arrive. Pay attention to posted signs. You'll keep your car windows closed until you're told to open them. A health care provider will check your order and may ask a few questions. After checking in, you might have to wait for the testing. Drive-thru testing places can be busy, so plan for a delay. If you have children with you, it's helpful to have things to occupy your child's time while waiting.
- Health care providers take the specimen from the back of the nose to test for coronavirus (COVID-19). To do that, the person being tested will be directed to lean their head back and not move. The health care provider will gently put a long Q-tip swab into the patient's nose to take a sample. It's very important to get the sample from the right place. Some drive-thru sites may offer self-swab testing (the person puts the swab in their nose themselves, following directions from the health care team).

Please explain the difference between Rapid tests vs. Antibody Tests?

Rapid tests can be analyzed where the sample is collected, and the results may be available in minutes. These may be PCR tests that detect the virus's genetic material, or antigen tests that detect specific proteins from the virus. Antigen tests usually provide results diagnosing an active coronavirus infection faster than PCR tests, but antigen tests have a slightly higher chance of missing an active infection. If an antigen test shows a negative result indicating that you do not have an active coronavirus infection, your health care provider may order a PCR test to confirm the result.

An antibody test determines if your blood contains antibodies, which your body generates to fight off the COVID virus. While rapid tests require a sample taken from the nose or throat, an antibody test is a blood test. Antibody tests indicate if you have had a past infection with COVID-19 or if you were immunized. They cannot be used to accurately diagnose a current infection.

Someone I live with is being required to get a weekly test. Will there be any discomfort or concerns of taking too many tests?

COVID tests can be a little uncomfortable when the specimen is being taken, particularly the nasal swab that people have described as "tickling your brain." The swab only takes a few moments, and the benefit far outweighs the momentary discomfort. Repeated testing has no negative impact or side effects and should not be a cause of undue concern. It is important to remember that testing does not take the place of critical prevention measures such as wearing a mask and physically distancing from others, so it is important that even if you are getting regular testing, you continue to practice these measures.

Someone I live with recently traveled out-of-state, and to be safe went to get a COVID test. They tested positive but after waiting 24 hours they tested again and got a negative result. Which one is correct, and how many days or hours should an individual wait in between taking COVID tests?

If both tests were performed using the PCR test, the positive test is probably the correct one, since the test is designed to have a very low chance of testing negative when you are, in fact, positive (a so-called "false negative" test). However, it is important to consult with your health care provider if you get inconsistent results, since many other factors can affect your test. If one or both of the tests were done using the antigen test, a confirmatory PCR test is probably necessary. COVID-19 tests tell you only about the moment in time when the specimen is taken. Repeating a test within a day or two is probably unnecessary unless you are advised to by a health care provider, or if the laboratory advises you that there were irregularities in your test. Do not come to work if you are experiencing symptoms even if you test negative.
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I've heard people who have had tested negative for COVID, but still feel symptoms. Should they isolate? What is the guidance PG&E is provided in such case?

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Individuals who test negative and experience COVID-like symptoms should follow up with their health care provider as negative results do not preclude an individual from SARS-CoV-2 infection. You should not come to work if you feel ill.

When should I seek emergency medical attention if I tested positive for COVID-19?

Seek emergency medical attention immediately if you experience any of the following:
- Trouble breathing
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- New confusion
- Inability to wake or stay awake
- Bluish lips or face
- Any other symptom that could be life-threatening

I tested positive for COVID-19. Am I still considered contagious after 14-days and should I retest for the virus or antibodies after the isolation period for assurance?

The Centers for Disease Control advises that anyone testing positive for COVID (with or without symptoms) should isolate for at least 10 days. Once the isolation period is completed, it is unlikely you would still be contagious, and you can resume normal work. There is no reason to re-test, as it is possible you would continue to test positive for some time after you are no longer contagious.

What do I need to do if I test positive for COVID?

For the health and safety of all employees and customers, those whose job requires them to report to a PG&E office, field or other location where they interact with customers, employees or the public, are required to immediately report to the HR Help Line at 415-973-4357 if they test positive for the COVID-19 virus. Those working remotely are also asked to call the Help Line if they test positive. The Help Line will provide direction on remaining off work and other measures that need to be taken.

When talking about an OSHA outbreak at a facility (3 or more cases within 14 days), can you confirm all at the facility must be tested or encouraged to test?

When an outbreak occurs at a facility, PG&E will provide COVID-19 testing weekly to all employees who were present during the exposure period. COVID-19 testing is provided at no cost to employees during employees' working hours, through their medical provider. A second test will be provided one week later, and PG&E will continue to provide weekly COVID-19 testing of employees who remain at the affected workplace until the outbreak is declared terminated by PG&E following OSHA rules, or by the local health department.

The CDC states that if you are quarantined as a result of exposure to someone who tests positive, you may return to work after 10 days if you remain symptom-free during the quarantine period. Will PG&E modify the LiveSafe app accordingly?

While the CDC changed its guidance in December 2020 to allow quarantined personnel to return to work after 10 days, this decision was not adopted by all of the counties in PG&E's service territory. As many counties still require a 14-day quarantine, PG&E is keeping the 14-day quarantine requirement at this time.

PG&E employees who test positive must remain off work until 10 days have passed since their test (or the onset of symptoms whichever is earlier) AND they have gone without a fever for 24 hours (without using fever-reducing medicine), AND their symptoms are improving. This is consistent with CDC and State of California guidance.

The LiveSafe application will continue to reflect these PG&E requirements, which are consistent with Cal/OSHA requirements.

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Why are we not requiring an employee to test negative prior to coming back to work after they have tested positive for COVID as a fitness for duty clearance requirement?

PG&E relies on guidance from CDC which states the following: "*Employers should not require a sick employee to provide a negative COVID-19 test result or healthcare provider's note to return to work. Employees with COVID-19 who have stayed home can stop home isolation and return to work when they have met one of the sets of criteria found* here."

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