OMA Ontario Medical Association

Offering lab-based PCR testing for COVID-19 in your office
A guide for community-based practices

Lab-based polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests are the gold standard used to diagnose or rule out COVID-19. These are the same type of tests that are offered in assessment centres; the specimen is collected in your office and then sent to a lab to run the test.

Providing lab-based PCR tests in your practice is optional. If you do not have capacity to test in your office, refer the patient to a local testing site or the Emergency Department, as appropriate based on your clinical assessment.

▶ Who to test

Groups eligible for publicly funded PCR tests are outlined in the Ministry of Health's integrated testing & case, contact and outbreak management interim guidance: Omicron surge.

They include:
- Select symptomatic patients, including patient-facing health-care workers and household members of workers in highest-risk settings (e.g. hospitals, congregate living settings, etc.)
- Indigenous individuals and those travelling to these communities for work
- Individuals being admitted or transferred to or from a hospital or congregate living setting

Did you know?

Rapid molecular tests can be used to diagnose COVID-19 within 30 minutes. These tests can only be used in select scenarios and require additional administrative work to report the results.

Rapid antigen tests can also now be used to diagnose COVID-19. A positive result on a rapid antigen test is considered a confirmed case of COVID-19. However, a single negative result cannot be used to rule out COVID-19.

▶ Preparing to test

Specimen collection supplies

Specimens can be collected using several different types of kits: nasopharyngeal, deep nasal/nasal/oral or saliva. For information on the different types of specimen collection kits, please refer to Public Health Ontario's (PHO's) COVID-19 PCR Collection Kits page.

Free swab kits are available to order online from eHealth Ontario. Indicate the type of swab kits (that you would like to order and include your contact information, desired quantity, and expected delivery date. If you have any questions during the ordering process, contact covid19testing@ontariohealth.ca.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and isolation requirements
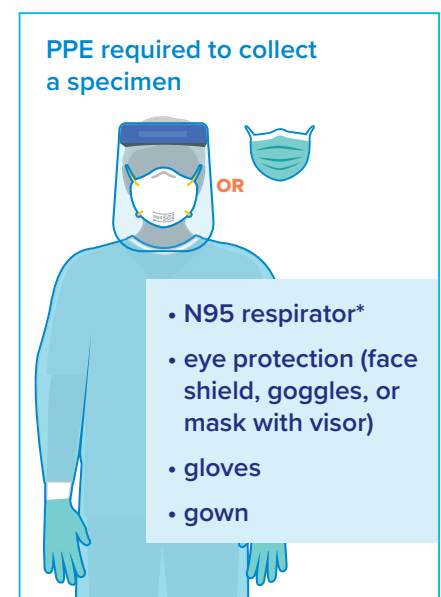
To test someone with suspected COVID-19, Droplet/Contact precautions are required, including hand hygiene prior to donning and after doffing PPE.

PPE required to collect a specimen

OR

- N95 respirator*
- eye protection (face shield, goggles, or mask with visor)
- gloves
- gown

* If a fit-tested, seal-checked N95 respirator is not available, you can use a non-fit tested N95 respirator, or a well-fitting surgical mask.

▶ How to test

Collect an upper respiratory tract specimen using an appropriate kit. **Preferred specimen types for diagnostic PCR testing include** (in descending order of sensitivity):

- nasopharyngeal swab (NPS)
- combined swab of throat and both nares
- deep nasal swab
- anterior nares (both nares)
- saliva (accepted by limited non-PHO laboratories only; do not use with symptomatic patients in long-term care or retirement homes or hospitalized patients)

Although NPS is the preferred specimen type due to its high sensitivity, consider the age and tolerance of the patient when selecting the approach to collecting a specimen. For example, non-nasal swabs may be better tolerated by some children.

For instructions on how to perform the specimen collection, refer to PHO's COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) Testing: Preferred Specimen Collection Methods.

Tip: Pre-label the swab so that it can be dropped into the specimen bag once the swab is obtained.

▶ Submitting specimens

Ordering tests

- Complete the COVID-19 and respiratory virus test requisition.

Preparing and shipping specimens

- Place specimen in the specimen bag with completed requisition in the attached pouch, so it is not exposed to the specimen.
- Store and transport the specimen at 2 to 8 degrees C. Delivery to the laboratory should occur within 72 hours of collection – longer delays may reduce test sensitivity.
- To avoid specimen cancellations, make sure to secure the lid of the tube properly to prevent it from leaking when shipped and ensure the specimen is clearly labelled with the collection date and two unique identifiers that match the requisition (i.e. full patient name, HIN, DOB).

Use your current specimen delivery arrangements with local labs (e.g., community lab) or arrange for transportation to nearest PHO laboratory (PHO will not arrange delivery).

Peer tips

Consider scheduling patients with COVID-19 symptoms at the beginning or end of the day when staff and other patients are not in the office. If possible, also consider using a specific exam room, as well as a separate entrance.

Isolate the patient in a room with a closed door upon arrival. If no exam room is available, ask the patient to wait outside or in car, and call/text them when room becomes available. After the patient leaves, clean any patient-contact surfaces (i.e. areas within 2 metres of the patient) as soon as possible.

Laboratory locations

Community, public health and hospital laboratories process COVID-19 tests. The community laboratories offering publicly funded PCR testing include Alpha, Bio-Test, Dynacare, LifeLabs, MedLabs of Windsor (MLW), and MedHealth Labs.

▶ Test results

Test result notifications

The testing laboratory will provide the ordering clinician with a report by fax or the electronic interface that you use with them if you have a pre-existing relationship.

Test results are also available through the Ontario Laboratories Information System (OLIS). You can view and/or download results into your EMR using the OLIS patient query (results are not auto-delivered to the EMR). If you are a PEM-based physician registered for HRM, you will also receive HRM COVID-19 notifications that can alert you to check OLIS for a particular test result.

Notification of tests that are cancelled will be faxed.

> **i** **Test turnaround time**
>
> Most tests are completed within 24-48 hours. Advise patients to isolate as appropriate. For isolation requirements, refer to the [COVID-19 Quick Reference Public Health Guidance on Testing and Clearance.](#)

Reporting requirements

COVID-19 is a designated disease of public health significance reportable under the Health Protection and Promotion Act. Physicians are required to contact your local public health unit to report probable and confirmed cases according to the case definition.

The testing laboratory reports all positive results to the local public health unit.

Informing patients of their test results

✓ *Positive results:*
The CPSO states that positive COVID-19 results must be communicated directly to the patient as soon as possible, given their significance. It is not appropriate to rely on patients accessing their results on their own through the online portal or any other mechanism.

X *Negative results:*
Negative results do not routinely need to be communicated to the patient. A "no news is good news" approach may be used to communicate negative test results for patients who are reasonably able to access their results on their own; otherwise, negative test results will need to be communicated to them directly.

> In order to access [Ontario Health's online portal](#), patients must have a valid (green) Ontario health card, internet access, and able to understand and navigate a website in English. For patients who are reasonably able to access their test results on their own, clearly explain to them that they can check their results on the portal and that you will contact them directly in the event of a positive result.

? *Invalid results and tests that were not performed or were cancelled:*
If the test result is invalid or the test was cancelled, the patient should be contacted and told to return to the clinic to be re-tested.

▶ Billing

Insured services

Testing symptomatic individuals and asymptomatic individuals that are part of a targeted population is are insured services.

For swabbing your own patients who qualify for testing as an insured service in your office, bill as follows:

Swab only*	Service: minor assessment Fee: $23.75 Fee Code: A001
Assessment and swab**	Service: intermediate assessment Fee: $36.85 Fee Code: A007

* You can also bill for any other appropriate visit fees.

Uninsured services

Testing for travel or asymptomatic individuals that are not part of a targeted population are not insured services.

For physicians in capitation-based practices, all in-basket codes for rostered patients will be paid at the shadow billing rate. This includes A001 and A007.

▶ Have questions?

Please contact the Ontario Health Testing team at covid19testing@ontariohealth.ca for more information.

For questions related to specific laboratories:

- Alpha: 416-449-2166 or alpha@alphalabs.ca
- Bio-Test: (613) 789-4242
- Dynacare: 800.565.5721
- LifeLabs: 1-877-849-3637
- MedLabs of Windsor (MLW): 519-258-1991
- MedHealth Labs: 416-256-7278
- Public Health Ontario: PHO microbiologists and support staff are available and can be

contacted through the PHO Laboratory's Customer Service Centre at 416-235-6556 / 1-877-604-4567 or the After-Hours Emergency Duty Officer at 416-605-3113.

- For PHO laboratory contact information, click here.

▶ Resources

PHO: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – PCR