

Do I need a positive test to be diagnosed with Covid? Questions about Covid-19 tests

Q. Can I have a Covid infection without having a positive test?

YES! Studies show that as many as 8 out of 10 people (80%) with Covid do not show a positive result when tested.

There are several reasons for this, including:

- *The tests themselves are not 100% accurate and can show a false negative.* (This means the result shows negative when you actually do have the virus). We think about **3/10 people with Covid test false negative**. This is why some people are advised to continue to isolate if they do have symptoms.
- *The test was carried out too late. Ideally, it should be done by day 5 of your symptoms.* After this, it is more likely to be falsely negative.
- *The swab test was not carried out properly.* It has to hit exactly the right place at the back of the nose and throat and is not easy to perform perfectly. It can be awkward or uncomfortable

Q. I heard there are different types of test. What are they?

- *A swab of nose & throat.* This tests for the presence of the actual virus now. It is known as an 'antigen' test. You should get one if you have symptoms. It usually takes a day or two to process. More rapid tests are under development, which may allow treatment to be started earlier, at home.
- *Blood test, called an 'antibody' test.* This detects if you have had the infection in the past. This test is not yet totally reliable either, as many people who have had coronavirus confirmed via the swab test, are not found to have antibodies. It is important to understand whilst a positive antibody test may confirm infection, it does not confirm you will be immune forever.

Q. My doctor tells me that I have not had Covid if I had a negative test. Is this true?

NO! For the reasons above. You may find it helpful to show your doctor this leaflet

Q. So, is there a way a doctor can diagnose Covid infection without a positive test?

YES! In several ways:

- *By listening to the symptoms and problems you have.* This is the most important thing they can do. Many doctors are now used to seeing this illness and should be able to recognise the patterns, just as they do for more familiar and established diseases like chicken pox or measles.

- *By performing an examination and running standard lab tests.*

In fact, doctors now have guidance from World Health Organisation and other bodies on how to diagnose the infection, including without a positive blood test. For more information, follow these links:

WHO ICD-10 Emergency Coding for Covid 19 allows for diagnosis without a lab test.
<https://www.who.int/classifications/icd/covid19/en/>

<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19/surveillance/case-definition>

<https://www.paho.org/en/topics/coronavirus-infections/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-pandemic/case-definitions-covid-19>

Author: Dr. Clare Rayner MFOM