



1. Home (<https://www.gov.uk/>)
2. Coronavirus (COVID-19): antibody tests (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-antibody-tests>)

1. Department of Health & Social Care (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health-and-social-care>)

Guidance

# Coronavirus (COVID-19): antibody tests

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## Contents

- About antibody tests
- Types of antibody tests
- What getting an antibody test will tell you
- Who is eligible for an antibody test



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The government has announced the start of a major new national antibody testing programme, with plans to provide antibody tests to NHS and care staff in England from the end of May.

Clinicians will also be able to request the tests for patients in both hospital and social care settings if they think it's appropriate.

The UK government is buying tests on behalf of the devolved administrations, and each devolved nation is deciding how to use its test allocation.

## About antibody tests

Antibody tests are used to detect antibodies to the COVID-19 virus to see if you have previously had the virus. The test works by taking a blood sample and testing for the presence of antibodies to see if you have developed an immune response to the virus.

Antibody tests differ to virus swab (PCR) tests, which test to see if you currently have the virus.

There is no strong evidence yet to suggest that those who have had the virus develop long-lasting immunity which would prevent them from getting the virus again.

Therefore, the value of antibody tests is currently limited to answering the question of whether someone has had the virus or not, and providing data and a greater understanding on the spread of the virus.

## Types of antibody tests

The government will be providing laboratory-based tests in the first phase of our antibody testing programme, to NHS and care staff. Clinicians will also be able to request the tests for patients in both hospital and social care settings if they think it's appropriate. These tests require blood samples to be taken by trained professionals which means they are not suitable to be used at home.

The government is also working in partnership with the private sector to develop a 'finger-prick' type test, similar to a diabetes test, which will be suitable for use at home and without medical supervision but has not yet been validated for use. We will provide more detail on the development of this test.

The government continues to look at all options for testing for antibodies and to scan the market for new tests.

## What getting an antibody test will tell you

A positive antibody test will tell you whether you've previously had the virus that causes COVID-19 and that your body has produced an immune response.

There is no strong evidence yet to suggest that those who have been proven to have had the virus and to have produced antibodies are immune.

If you receive a positive antibody result it does not mean that you're immune, or that you cannot pass on the virus to others. It also does not mean that you can ignore social distancing measures.

Our understanding of the virus will grow as new scientific evidence and studies emerge. COVID-19 is a new disease, and our understanding of the body's immune response to it is limited. We do not know, for example, how long an antibody response lasts, whether the antibodies produced are effective in neutralising the virus, or whether

having antibodies means a person cannot transmit the virus to others.

In time, as the science develops and our understanding of the disease increases, we will have answers to these questions.

## **Who is eligible for an antibody test**

We're at the beginning of our antibody testing programme, and are prioritising NHS and care home staff who would like to be tested.

Clinicians will also be able to request the tests for patients in both hospital and social care settings if they think it's appropriate.

While the results of an antibody test will not allow people to make any changes to their behaviour, such as easing social distancing measures, there's clear value in knowing whether NHS and care workers and hospital patients and care home residents have had the virus, and in collecting data on the test results.