Types of COVID-19 tests

COVID-19 tests are available that can test for current infection or past infection.

A viral test tells you if you have an infection now. There are two types of viral tests: nucleic acid amplification tests (NAATs) and antigen tests.

An antibody test (also known as a serology test) might tell you if you had an infection in the past. Antibody tests should not be used to diagnose a current infection.

Two kinds of viral tests are available at State-run sites.

1. The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test is a type of NAAT, and it looks for pieces of the COVID-19 virus’ genes. It is sent to a lab for processing. The PCR test is the preferred test for diagnosing COVID-19 in asymptomatic and symptomatic patients.

2. Rapid antigen tests detect the virus' proteins instead of its genes. This type of test can be analyzed where the sample is collected. Rapid antigen tests work best in symptomatic patients and within a few days since symptoms started.

Two types of swabs are commonly used for COVID-19 testing.

The anterior nares swab is put a ½ inch into the nostril. The swabber will turn the swab inside the nostril for 10 to 15 seconds. The same swab may be used in both nostrils.

Some respiratory clinics and primary care offices offer nasopharyngeal swabs to patients who ask for it. A nasopharyngeal swab is used to touch the nasopharynx, which is the upper part of the throat behind the nose. The swab is put into the nostril until it touches the top of the throat that is behind the nose (about 2 inches).

To learn more about COVID-19 testing options in Rhode Island, visit covid.ri.gov/testing.