

COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) Rapid Antigen Tests

Guidance for Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) Use

March 17, 2022

Version 2.0

Key Points

- RATs are now available through [grocery stores and pharmacies](#) across Ontario.
- Presently, if you receive a positive result on a RAT, it is a very good indication that you have COVID-19. No PCR test is needed to confirm your diagnosis.
- One negative RAT result is not enough to rule out COVID-19. If you have symptoms of COVID-19, two negative RAT's 24-48 hours apart means you most likely do not have COVID-19 and you can discontinue self-isolation as long as you have no fever and symptoms are improving for 24 hours (48 hours for gastrointestinal symptoms). This does not apply to household members of a case.
- RATs should be done using an oral-nasal swab. RATs are not as good at identifying the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in the first 1-2 days after infection. See instructions from [Ontario Health](#).
- Workplaces offering screening using RATs should conduct testing 3-5 times each week using an oral-nasal swab for best results.

What are Rapid Antigen Tests?

Rapid antigen tests (RATs) work by detecting certain proteins in the COVID-19 virus. RATs can be performed in the workplace or at home, and results are available in 15-20 minutes.

When are RATs used?

With the surge of cases in Ontario due to the Omicron variant, access to PCR or molecular testing (lab-based testing) for COVID-19 is limited to [certain higher-risk groups](#). As a result, RATs are increasingly being used by individuals in the community.

RATs can be used for the following reasons:

- For “test-to-work” purposes to meet critical workforce needs in highest risk settings
- For frequent, repeated screening of people without symptoms (for example, through workplace screening programs)
- For testing people with symptoms to help them know how likely it is that the symptoms are caused by COVID-19 and whether or not they should isolate.

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One off-testing (for example, before a social gathering) is generally not recommended. If you choose to use a rapid antigen test in this way, complete it as close to the event as possible and know that a negative result could be a false negative.

Where can I get RATs?



Grocery Stores and Pharmacies:

Find a full listing of grocery stores and pharmacies offering free Rapid Test kits [here](#).



Workplaces:

Workplaces participating in the [Provincial Antigen Screening Program](#) may have access to rapid tests for regular screening of employees. Check with your local Chamber of Commerce for availability via the [Ontario Chamber of Commerce](#).



Schools:

School-aged children and families may receive rapid tests through distribution from their school.



For purchase:

Individuals may be able to purchase rapid antigen test kits through online retailers.

What type of swab should I use when conducting a RAT?

The Ontario Science Table now recommends an oral-nasal combination swab is the most effective at detecting the Omicron variant of COVID-19. This method will differ from test manufacturer instructions that describe nasal or nasopharyngeal sample collection; however, a combined oral-nasal swab can be used for any rapid antigen test.

To conduct an oral-nasal swab, swab each cheek, the back of the throat, and both nostrils. View a video on [how to perform an oral-nasal swab](#). Swabbing the back of the throat may induce a gag reflex; this is not dangerous and indicates you have swabbed the correct area.

Using Rapid Tests when Symptomatic

How can I use a RAT when I have symptoms of COVID-19?

If you have [symptoms of COVID-19](#), you and members of your household are required to self-isolate. The length of self-isolation depends on your vaccination status. [Learn more](#).

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If RATs are available, they can be used to assess the likelihood that symptoms are related to COVID-19. If you receive a positive result on a RAT, you likely have COVID-19. A PCR test is not needed to confirm your diagnosis.

A single negative RAT is not enough to rule out COVID-19. If you receive one negative RAT result, you must continue self-isolating. It can take several days for the amount of COVID-19 virus proteins to increase enough to be detectable by RAT. If you are symptomatic and conduct two RATs 24-48 hours apart and are both negative, you are less likely to have COVID-19. You can discontinue self-isolation once you have no fever and your symptoms have improved for at least 24 hours (or 48 hours if you had gastrointestinal symptoms). Your household members can also discontinue self-isolation as long as they have no symptoms of COVID-19.

If you had symptoms of COVID-19 and received a positive RAT or PCR test result, receiving two negative RATs does not shorten your isolation period*. Therefore, you and your household members must continue to self-isolate as outlined [here](#).

*Limited exceptions for critical staffing shortages in highest-risk settings. [Learn more](#).

When should I use a RAT if I have symptoms of COVID-19?

RATs are not very effective in detecting COVID-19 (particularly the Omicron variant) in the first 1-2 days of infection. Therefore, it is best to wait until 3 days after symptoms appear to conduct a RAT. If a RAT is conducted immediately after symptoms develop, it is best to wait until 48 hours after to conduct a second RAT. Anyone with symptoms should stay home until two negative RAT results are received after day 3 and symptoms are improving for 24 hours (48 hours for gastrointestinal symptoms).

Using Rapid Tests after Exposure to COVID-19

Can I use a RAT to shorten my self-isolation if someone in my house has received a positive COVID-19 test result?

No. Receiving a negative result (or two negative results within 24-48 hours) on a RAT does not shorten the self-isolation time required if you are required to self-isolate as a household contact of a case of COVID-19. [Learn more](#). If you develop symptoms after a recent negative RAT, do not assume your negative test means you don't have COVID-19. After developing symptoms, you should test again (see Using Rapid Tests when Symptomatic section above).

Can I use a RAT to shorten my self-isolation if someone in my house has symptoms of COVID-19?

If someone in your household has symptoms of COVID-19, you may be required to self-isolate for the same length of time as the case (depending on your vaccination status and whether you have received a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine). [Learn more](#). If you receive a negative RAT result (or two

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negative results within 24-48 hours) during this time, it does not change your self-isolation requirements. If you develop symptoms after a recent negative RAT, do not assume your negative test means you don't have COVID-19. After developing symptoms, you should test again (see Using Rapid Tests when Symptomatic section above).

If the symptomatic person in your household conducts two RATs, 24-48 hours apart, and they are both negative, they are less likely to have COVID-19. They can discontinue self-isolation once they have no fever and their symptoms have been improving for at least 24 hours (or 48 hours if they had gastrointestinal symptoms). Household members who are required to self-isolate can also discontinue self-isolation, as long as they have no symptoms of COVID-19.

When is the best time for me to take a RAT after I've been exposed to COVID-19?

It is generally not advised that individuals who have been exposed to COVID-19 conduct a RAT when asymptomatic. RATs are not as effective at identifying the COVID-19 virus Omicron variant before individuals are symptomatic. Individuals who have been exposed to COVID-19 should carefully self-monitor for [symptoms of COVID-19](#), including mild symptoms. If the individual becomes symptomatic at any time, follow guidance provided above for RATs in symptomatic individuals.

If you've been exposed to COVID-19, it is important to note that receiving a negative result on a RAT does not change any self-isolation requirements (if applicable) or self-monitoring requirements*. In addition, even if you receive a negative COVID-19 test result, individuals who live with a symptomatic person or case of COVID-19 may still be required to self-isolate while the case is self-isolating (depending on your vaccination status and whether you have received a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine). [Learn more here.](#)

*Limited exceptions for critical staffing shortages in highest-risk settings. [Learn more.](#)

Asymptomatic Rapid Antigen Screening

My business or organization participates in the Provincial Antigen Screening Program.

Who should we test and how often?

If RATs are used for voluntary screening, it is recommended that tests be conducted 3-5 times per week using an oral-nasal swab. Both fully vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals can participate in RAT screening, provided adequate testing supplies are available. If supply is limited, unvaccinated staff and those with only two doses of COVID-19 vaccine should be prioritized for rapid antigen screening.

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I had COVID-19 (Confirmed with PCR or RAT). When should I resume participating in rapid antigen screening?

An individual with confirmed COVID-19 on a molecular or RAT may resume asymptomatic screening testing after 30 days from their COVID-19 infection (based on the date of their symptom onset or specimen collection, whichever was earlier).

Frequently Asked Questions

I've tested positive on a RAT for COVID-19 and have finished my self-isolation period, but it's still positive when I take a RAT again. What does this mean?

It is not required for an individual to test negative on a RAT or PCR test to confirm completion of their self-isolation after having COVID-19. If you have completed the required self-isolation, you have no fever, and your symptoms have been improving for 24 hours (or 48 hours for gastrointestinal symptoms), you can generally return to work and resume activities. As an additional precaution, for a total of 10 days from symptom onset, even if self-isolation was complete after 5 days, individuals who were symptomatic or tested positive must continue to wear a well-fitted mask in all public settings, avoid activities which require masks to be removed (i.e. dining out), not visit anyone who is immunocompromised or at higher risk of illness (i.e. seniors) and not visit any highest risk settings.

Please note: It is important to calculate the period of self-isolation correctly. Count the day that symptoms started or the day of the test specimen collection (whichever is earlier) as day 0 of isolation. For example, if symptoms develop on February 15th, that would be considered Day 0 of isolation, and if required to self-isolate for 5 days, self-isolation would end on February 20th (resuming activities February 21st).

I took a RAT and am getting a faint positive line. Does this mean it's positive?

Yes, a faint line is still a positive test result.

Should I complete a rapid antigen test before attending a social gathering or event?

Many people are looking for reassurance prior to attending a social event/gathering/visit and may choose to complete a rapid antigen test. Infrequent rapid antigen test use should not be relied on as a measure to enable social activities. If completing a rapid antigen test, you should complete it as close to the event as possible (e.g. on the same day, ideally within a few hours of the event). It is important to recognize the limitations of a negative result on a rapid antigen test. Rapid antigen tests are not very effective at detecting COVID-19 in people who are not symptomatic or in people who have symptoms but are in their first 1-2 days of infection. People infected with COVID-19 may test negative on a rapid antigen test for several days before testing positive; this means you could test negative on a rapid antigen test but still be infectious with COVID-19. Those with a negative one-off rapid antigen test should still follow existing public health measures, including masking, physical distancing and limiting contacts.

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Additional Resources

- [Use of Rapid Antigen Tests during the Omicron Wave – Ontario Science Table](#)
- [COVID-19 Integrated Testing & Case, Contact and Outbreak Management Interim Guidance: Omicron Surge – Ministry of Health](#)
- [COVID-19 Interim Guidance: Omicron Surge Management of Critical Staffing Shortages in Highest Risk Settings – Ministry of Health](#)
- [Rapid Testing for At Home Use – Ontario](#)
- [Rapid Antigen Test Information Sheet - Ontario](#)