

Briefing Note

Testing Individuals for Coronavirus – A Guide for Food Businesses

Part of the uncertainty surrounding Covid-19 is not knowing who has it, who has had it and when it's safe to return to normal, though many believe that this will be a new version of normal.

The aim of testing is three-fold

- To inform correct diagnosis of possible sufferers
- To provide data regarding the rate of infection [the so-called R-value]
- To be able to track and trace contacts of those who have the infection

What are the differences between different types of testing individuals?

The test currently being offered for individuals for SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing COVID-19, is an **antigen test**. The antigen test tests only for current infection and is only being offered when you have symptoms. It is a test for the genetic signature of the RNA in the virus and can only be conducted in a laboratory. The test is done on a swab from the throat or nose, which can either be taken at a drive-through site or self-taken at home using the kit provided. The test is highly sensitive and specific. Allow 48-72 hours for return of a result.

Each SARS-CoV-2 virus particle causing COVID-19 contains the same signature RNA and proteins (the "**antigen**"). An infected person, even if not showing symptoms, has SARS-CoV-2 virus particles in their nose and throat. They still have them (and can still infect others) for a short period after recovery from symptoms; the exact length of this period is not yet known.

The other test you hear about is an **antibody test**. The antigen provokes the immune system to produce **antibodies**. Unlike virus particles, these antibodies remain in the blood even after a person has recovered. It is assumed (though not proven) that a person with antibodies has immunity against future infection.

Antibody tests measure whether a person has been previously infected by SARS-CoV-2 (and, by inference, immunity). They are done on a blood sample and measures an immunological reaction. They can either be at-home screening devices (similar to a pregnancy test stick) or performed in laboratories. They are inherently less specific than the antigen test. COVID-19 antibody tests are being developed, but the UK Government does not currently consider any to be reliable enough for roll-out.



Who can be tested?

The UK government are updating their advice and requirements around COVID-19 testing. Please visit their website for the latest advice, confirmation of essential workers, and links to your local testing centres.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-getting-tested>

Note: The UK has separate instructions for England and the devolved governments which can be found within the Getting Tested Guidance.

The advice IFST have previously given still holds true. Staff who have the virus or suspect that they have the virus should not present themselves for work. The recommendation is that they present themselves for testing within 3 days of symptoms developing and no later than 5 days after that. They should/self-isolate for 7 days, and if within a family environment, their family may also be tested, and would need to self-isolate for 14 days.

How to arrange a test

The self referral test booking routes are only available in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Employers can refer essential workers who are self-isolating. This is done through a secure employer referral portal.

This allows you to upload a full list of names and contact details of self-isolating staff. If referred through this route, staff will receive a text with a unique invitation code to book themselves or their symptomatic family member[s] at a regional testing centre.

The Testing Process

Throat and nose swabs can now be taken at regional centres, with mobile units being reserved for care homes, prisons and police stations. A simple video on the government website gives a broad outline of the procedure.

If the staff member has been allocated a home testing kit, then another video explains the procedure they need to follow. Test results should be available within 48 - 72 hours.

As a separate issue, there is a government statement on preserving the privacy of the result.

Contact Track and Trace

The government are developing strategies to monitor infection as a way to target measures to address this pandemic. As these procedures develop, they may help in determining people's fitness for work as they will alert individuals that they need to self-isolate.

