

Rapid Asymptomatic COVID-19 Screening: Frequently Asked Questions

Rapid Tests

What are rapid tests?

Rapid tests are medical tests that can be performed and processed quickly and more easily than lab-based tests. There are two primary types of rapid tests for the virus that causes COVID-19: rapid nucleic acid tests detect genetic material (RNA) of the SARS-CoV2 virus and rapid antigen tests detect SARS-CoV2 viral proteins rather than genetic material.

What rapid tests can be used in Alberta for asymptomatic COVID-19 screening?

All screening must be performed on [Health Canada-approved testing devices](#) and is required to be done in compliance with testing guidelines issued by Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) and in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Organizations should not use testing devices that have not been approved by Health Canada, as results cannot be meaningfully interpreted.

How are rapid tests administered (throat, nose swab, etc.)?

Rapid tests are completed by collecting a throat, nasal or nasopharyngeal sample from an individual, according to the manufacturer's instructions. Most antigen rapid tests used for asymptomatic COVID-19 screening require nasal swab collection. Samples are processed to produce a positive or negative result.

How long does it typically take to get test results?

Rapid antigen tests can produce results in approximately 15 minutes. Please note this does not include the time required to collect and prepare samples. Test times and schedules should be planned accordingly.

How accurate are rapid antigen tests?

While rapid antigen tests produce results faster than the lab-based RT-PCR test, they are not as sensitive. Lower sensitivity means that the tests require more virus for a positive result than the gold standard PCR test. This means the rapid antigen tests might produce a negative result even though there is virus present. This is called a false negative.

What does a positive result on a rapid antigen test mean?

A positive result on a rapid screen of an asymptomatic person is not diagnostic for COVID-19. However, an individual who screens positive must immediately be removed from the site and must isolate for 10 days. The person should arrange a further test at an Alberta Health Services' assessment centre, for verification through the public health testing system. If the second test is positive, isolation would continue. If the second test is negative, and the person still has no symptoms, the isolation can stop.

Rapid Asymptomatic COVID-19 Screening: Frequently Asked Questions

What does a negative result on a rapid antigen test mean?

A negative rapid antigen test result does not guarantee that the individual is not infected with COVID-19 or will not spread it to others. In asymptomatic individuals, false negatives are common. As such, the individual is required to continue to adhere to public health rules such as masking, physical distancing, hand hygiene, etc.

Do rapid tests screen for variants of concern (VOC)?

The rapid tests will provide a positive result no matter which strain of the virus that causes COVID-19 a person is infected with. Rapid tests cannot differentiate between variants of concern and other strains. When an individual receives their confirmatory test through Alberta Health Services, the confirmatory sample will be checked for VOC.

If someone has recovered from a COVID-19 infection, how will this impact their rapid test results?

Recent infection with COVID-19 may interfere with test effectiveness. Screening results in these individuals should be interpreted with caution. We do not recommend screening someone if they have been diagnosed with COVID-19 within the last 6 weeks.

What is the storage protocol for rapid tests?

Please refer to manufacturer instructions specific for the brand and model being used for rapid test storage and use. Many antigen tests require storage above 2°C and must be above 15°C before testing.

Do rapid tests expire?

Rapid tests do have an expiry date; manufacturer instructions for test usage dates and storage requirements must be followed.

Screening Program

How does rapid asymptomatic screening work?

Screening programs use rapid tests to quickly screen and isolate potentially infectious individuals, which can help limit viral transmission. A sample is collected from individuals and analyzed using a rapid test. Rapid antigen tests can deliver results in as little as 15 minutes and be used to screen employees or others before entering a site.

A positive screen would result in an individual immediately being removed from the site and isolating, and requires verification through the public health testing system, with a test administered by Alberta Health Services. An individual who screens negative is able to enter the setting. Please note, screening using rapid antigen tests identifies some, but not all, pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic cases. Screening can't rule out COVID-19 infection, and in asymptomatic individuals, false negatives are common.

Rapid Asymptomatic COVID-19 Screening: Frequently Asked Questions

Public health guidelines including masking, hand hygiene, and physical distancing must always be followed, regardless of screening results.

What settings can use rapid screening programs?

Screening programs can be beneficial in high-risk populations, high-risk settings and workplaces, essential services, frontline workers, and in settings and industries that will support the reopening of economic and social activities.

Can screening be mandated in private settings?

Employers should seek legal advice on issues of human rights, labour and employment law, privacy, health information, and occupational health and safety before implementing a testing program. Based on this advice, employers should develop a company policy related to COVID-19 testing.

Who can be screened?

Individuals who are asymptomatic (i.e., they have no symptoms) and have no known close contact with a confirmed positive case are eligible for screening. Individuals with core COVID-19 symptoms or who are close contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case should not undergo screening and instead should immediately be directed to the public health testing system for a test administered by Alberta Health Services.

Can rapid asymptomatic screening be done in an outbreak setting?

Rapid asymptomatic screening may only be done in an outbreak setting under the guidance of public health officials.

If an individual has been vaccinated, can they be screened using a rapid test?

Individuals who have received a COVID-19 vaccine are still eligible for asymptomatic screening.

How often should screening be done and when?

It is recommended screening be done once per week. An effective screening program requires screening to be done on a regular basis with an established schedule. Screening less often than weekly has limited value. Screening can happen before entering a facility, at the start of a shift, at any time during a shift, or during set 'screening clinics' arranged at certain days/times. Each option has its own logistical considerations. An organization has to identify which approach works best for them.

Who can administer a rapid test?

Anyone who has completed the required training on the specific test being administered.

Rapid Asymptomatic COVID-19 Screening: Frequently Asked Questions

Can swabs be self-administered?

Organizations may allow people who are being tested to swab themselves, under conditions outlined in the organization's testing protocol and agreed to by Alberta Health.

What is the process for requesting rapid tests from the Government of Alberta?

Rapid tests can be requested from the Government of Alberta by completing a [Rapid Test Request Submission Form online](#). Submissions will be reviewed by Alberta Health, which will evaluate submissions for adherence to public health guidelines and screening best practices. Successful applicants will be required to enter into an agreement, will then receive rapid tests and are required to meet reporting requirements.

How does the Government decide who will receive rapid tests?

Alberta Health will evaluate the details of all applications and provide support and feedback on proposed screening programs. Submissions are reviewed for adherence to public health guidelines and detailed screening procedures. Additionally, a clear plan for presumptive positive case management and reporting results to Alberta Health is assessed. Organizations whose protocols are approved will sign a Letter of Agreement that stipulates the organization will follow public health guidelines and provide weekly reporting to Alberta Health on use of the tests (e.g., numbers of tests used, number of negatives/positives, etc.). After the agreement is signed, test shipment(s) will be arranged and organizations can initiate their screening program. Rapid tests can also be purchased privately; however, screening programs must still align with public health requirements.

Who is responsible for paying for a screening programs?

Alberta Health will provide the test kits at no charge. Organizations are responsible for all other costs related to screening programs they initiate and they assume all medical and legal responsibilities associated with the screening programs. They are also responsible for ensuring proper protocols are in place for COVID-19 screening, including, but not limited to: quality control testing, quality assurance practices, test result interpretation, biosafety and personal protective equipment, result sharing (including privacy requirements), appropriate follow up on positive test results, and disposal of biohazardous material.

If rapid tests are privately purchased, do organizations still need to follow guidelines?

Yes, public health guidelines including spacing, isolating when symptomatic or if not fully vaccinated and a close contact of a confirmed positive, and hand hygiene must

COVID-19 INFORMATION

Rapid Asymptomatic COVID-19 Screening: Frequently Asked Questions

always be followed regardless of participation in a screening program. The following guidelines are available on the Government website:

- [Guidance for employer-initiated COVID-19 testing](#)
- [Rapid asymptomatic COVID-19 screening guidelines](#)

For more information or if you have any questions, please contact:

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