

Testing for COVID-19 Antibodies

Frequently Asked Questions

This piece explains COVID-19 antibody testing and what it means for people with cancer.

What are antibodies?

Our immune system develops antibodies in the days and weeks after being infected. Antibodies can help our bodies “remember” an infection it has seen before. They can also help protect against getting the infection again.

What is a COVID-19 antibody test?

An COVID-19 antibody test is a blood test that checks to see if you have had COVID-19. UW Medicine has created a COVID-19 antibody test.

How accurate is the COVID-19 antibody test used by UW Medicine and SCCA?

The test is very accurate. By 25 days after an infection, almost 100% of people with COVID-19 will have a “positive” test. It is also still possible to have a “false positive” or “false negative” result.

A **false positive** result means the test is positive even though you never had COVID-19. Even very good antibody tests, like the one we use, can give false positives.

A **false negative** result means the test result is negative even though you actually did have COVID-19. False negatives can happen in people with weakened immune systems, such as cancer patients. When this happens, it is likely because your weakened immune system did not or has not yet made the antibodies to fight the infection. It is unclear if this test works as well in patients who have weakened immune responses.

Does a positive antibody test result mean you can't get infected with COVID-19 again?

We do not yet know, and we hope to have an answer to this question in the coming months. If someone tests positive for the antibody, they should continue to follow public health recommendations on physical distancing, hand hygiene, wiping down high-touch surfaces at home, staying home when ill and masking when in public spaces.

Is testing recommended for cancer patients?

No, but it depends on your situation. Antibody testing is not routinely recommended for cancer patients at this time. In general, antibody testing is done by health departments, so they can better understand how the disease is spread among healthy people. Talk to your provider if you have questions about whether you should get an antibody test.

I want to know if I had COVID-19. Can I go to a hospital or clinic to get an antibody test?

No. Your provider needs to order the test. This test may be hard to interpret in cancer patients, so discussing testing with your cancer care team is important.

I think I have COVID-19 symptoms. Should I get the antibody test?

No. The antibody test is not used to diagnose COVID-19. If you have any COVID-19 symptoms (fever, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, wheezing, stuffy nose, runny nose, cough, muscle pain, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, new diarrhea) talk to your provider about getting a test that looks for the virus (not the antibodies). This test is usually a nasal swab, not a blood test.

Why are there still so many unanswered questions about antibody testing?

We are still early in the overall pandemic of COVID-19, and it will take time to better understand how antibodies play a role in protecting us from re-infection from the virus. Ongoing studies are currently organized to better understand:

- How can antibody tests be used to predict who might be protected?
- How long might these “protective” antibodies last?
- How are antibodies produced differently among cancer patients?
- How might antibodies help us design better vaccines to prevent COVID-19?

Questions?

Contact your care team with additional questions about COVID-19 antibody testing.