



Version 2a: 19 April 2020

# Factsheet: testing for screening purposes: which test to use, testing criteria, expedited testing and FAQs

## Purpose and scope

This factsheet is intended for public sector use outside of the health system and as general advice only; you should check whether your agency has developed additional, specific guidelines applicable to your workplace.

This factsheet outlines **what type of test for COVID-19 is effective**, that is, what type of tests is actually able to reliably indicate whether or not a person has been infected with COVID-19.

It will also cover and explain the **testing criteria** for testing for COVID-19, and provide information on where someone can get tested.

Additionally, this factsheet will outline the process and requirements for **expedited testing** for agencies that require testing results in less than 20 hours (e.g. agencies that have clients in high density or high contact environments, like correctional facilities, etc.).

Finally, this factsheet will address a number of **Frequently Asked Questions** (FAQs).

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au) or contact the National Coronavirus Information Hotline on 1800 020 080. For essential South Australia-specific advice, visit [www.covid-19.sa.gov.au](http://www.covid-19.sa.gov.au) or call the SA Covid-19 Hotline on 1800 253 787.

## What type of COVID-19 test is effective?

There are currently two different COVID-19 tests available:

1. **Molecular testing** (the regular, recommended COVID-19 testing method)
2. **Rapid test kits/serological testing** (also known as antibody, IgM and/or IgG testing)

## Molecular testing

- is **recommended** by Australian governments and health authorities
- is available at COVID-19 clinics and testing centres in South Australia.
- detects the virus itself by identifying its genetic material in a person.
- therefore returns a reliable result at an early stage of infection.
- and is therefore the most accurate test currently available.
- is usually done by collecting samples from the throat and nose on the one swab.
- usually takes a couple of days to return a positive or negative result.

## Rapid test kits/serological testing

- are **NOT recommended** by Australian governments and health authorities
- are therefore currently **prohibited in South Australia** under the Emergency Management (Prohibition of Point of Care Serology Tests) (COVID-19) Direction 2020
- detect if a person has **antibodies** for COVID-19; it **does not detect the virus** itself
- as such do not detect the virus in people who do not yet produce antibodies. People may only start producing antibodies 7 to 12 days after they first become sick. Elderly or immunocompromised people may not be able to produce any antibodies.
- therefore cannot detect COVID-19 during the early stages of infection. This can be a multi-day period during which someone has the virus, is contagious, but does not yet produce antibodies.
- will therefore return an incorrect negative result during this period, despite the fact that the tested person is infected and contagious.
- may also return false positive results by misidentifying other viruses as COVID-19
- for this reason, present significant risks to the tested person's health, to the community, and the overall public health response to COVID-19, if used as a way to diagnose acute COVID-19.
- are usually done by collecting a small venous or finger prick blood sample.
- return a result within 15 – 30 minutes, albeit an unreliable one.
- may have a possible future use in determining unrecognised past infection and mapping immunity across the community, subject to further evaluation.

## What are the criteria for testing?

### Criteria

From Thursday 16 April to Thursday 30 April 2020, all South Australians with symptoms of COVID-19 will be able to get tested as part of a two week testing blitz.

Patients who meet the following clinical criteria can be tested for COVID-19:

- Fever OR chills (in the absence of an alternative illness that explains these symptoms)
- OR**
- An acute respiratory infection (e.g. cough, sore throat, runny nose or shortness of breath)

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### No predictive testing possible if no symptoms

There have been requests for testing for “screening” purposes, specifically seeking to “clear” non-symptomatic people of the infection prior to entering a facility or workplace.

Importantly, if a person does **not** have any symptoms and is not epidemiologically linked to a case, there is **no testing that can be done** to predict whether or not a person will become unwell.

As such, predictive testing to screen individuals is not possible and should not be requested or required.

Instead, it is important to ensure employees, clients and others are made aware of what is recommended:

- Practice social distancing and good handwashing/personal hygiene
- Follow health authorities’ advice and observe current restrictions
- Self-monitor for symptoms
- If unwell, stay home
- Seek medical advice or care if you are unwell

**ONLY seek testing for COVID-19 if you meet the testing criteria.**

### Why are there testing criteria? Can’t we simply test everyone?

These testing criteria are in place because we currently cannot test everyone.

There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, there is no value in testing everyone. Tests do not have any predictive value.

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Secondly, there is a global shortage of test kits, including in Australia.

Testing everyone would therefore not leave enough test kits to use in critical or high-risk situations, for example in medical or aged care facilities where a resident has become unwell and is suspected of having COVID-19.

Finally, testing the entire population would take up more time and resources than frontline medical professionals have.

Testing everyone would therefore limit frontline health workers' ability to care for those that need immediate attention, for example those who are in intensive care, or otherwise very ill or at high-risk.

## Where and how to get tested for COVID-19

People with COVID-19 symptoms can visit a dedicated COVID-19 clinic to be assessed and tested. You do not need to call ahead or make an appointment.

To attend an SA Pathology drive-through service at the Repat or Hampstead site, you will need to call your GP clinic to provide a referral.

There is a Medicare rebate to cover the cost of COVID-19 testing.

### 1. COVID-19 clinics in hospitals in metropolitan Adelaide

- [Flinders Medical Centre](#)
- [Lyell McEwin Hospital \(PDF 1059KB\)](#)(opens in a new window)
- [Royal Adelaide Hospital](#)
- [Women's and Children's Hospital](#)

### 2. Regional COVID-19 clinics

- [Gawler Health Service](#)
- [Kangaroo Island Health Service](#)
- [Mount Barker Hospital](#)
- [Mount Gambier and Districts Health Service](#)
- [Riverland General Hospital](#)
- [South Coast District Hospital](#)
- [Tanunda War Memorial Hospital](#)
- [Yorke & Northern Local Health Network](#)
- Planning is also underway to open additional regional COVID-19 clinics in other regional Local Health Networks.

### 3. Drive-through centres

- [Ceduna](#)
- [Hampstead Rehabilitation Centre](#)
- [Repat Health Precinct](#)
- [Port Augusta Hospital](#)
- [Port Lincoln](#)
- [Whyalla Hospital](#)

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- [Tanunda War Memorial Hospital](#)

**4. Home** (note: a request for specimen collection is required to access this service)

- A home testing service is currently available in metropolitan Adelaide.
- This service can be requested by a doctor for their patient when needed
- More information on the process is available via [this link](#).

**5. On-site testing for residential facilities** (aged care, residential, correctional, etc.)

- Facilities **with** on-site medical or nursing staff can request test kits through their medical staff's usual supply channels.
- These staff must ensure that they have full PPE and are trained in appropriate collection techniques
- Facilities **without** on-site medical or nursing staff can request a visit
- More information on the process is available via [this link](#)

### Expedited testing for high-risk patients, clients or situations

Regular testing of a specimen currently takes approximately 20 hours from the time it gets to the laboratory.

If you are very worried about a patient or client in your care, it is important that the transport of specimens is expedited.

Expedited testing can return a result within several hours.

Where expedited testing is required, **it is important to contact the SA Pathology Duty Medical Pathologist** to discuss the situation and seek advice on the response. This service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, on telephone **8222 3000**.

Please ensure when arranging the request as per the above process, that your request form has adequate detail to identify a high-risk client or situation.

It should make clear that:

- The testing is required for **clients** (not for staff)
- The testing is required in **high-density and/or high-contact environments**.  
Examples may include, but are not limited to:
  - Disability facilities
  - Correctional facilities
  - Residential aged care facilities
  - Mental health care facilities

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- Your agency will take responsibility for arranging the transport of the swab to SA Pathology for testing.

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## FAQs

**Q: Can I make everyone who wants to enter my community or facility take a COVID-19 test before they can enter?**

**A:** No. This type of rapid, point-of-care serology testing is strongly advised against and currently prohibited in South Australia.

The reason for this is that this is **NOT** an effective or reliable safeguarding measure, as this type of test often fails to detect COVID-19 in people without symptoms, and may even fail to detect the virus in people who do have them.

- 1** If you use these tests, infected and contagious people might return a false-negative test, enter your community or facility, and infect others.

Instead, a more effective solution would be to ask screening questions and/or require **preventive self-quarantine**.

This means that you would require anyone who wants to enter your community or facility to self-quarantine for 14 days before entering, and then only enter if no symptoms have appeared during the 14-day period. This is the best way to reduce the risk of allowing infected and contagious people in.

No preventive testing option currently exists.

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**Q: Can I use the 15-minute COVID-19 tests that I have been reading about in the media?**

**A:** Using these tests for diagnosing COVID-19 is **NOT** recommended and currently prohibited in South Australia.

- 2** The reason for this is that they **cannot** detect COVID-19 in people who do not have symptoms, and sometimes even return false-negative results for people who do have symptoms.

If they were used to diagnose COVID-19, there would be a high risk of misdiagnosing, which would put people's health and the health of the broader community at significant risk.

Instead, it is recommended to undertake molecular tests at [COVID-19 clinics and testing centres](#) to ensure you receive a reliable result. These tests may take a couple of days to return a positive or negative result.

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- 3** **Q: Can I use temperature checking or thermal screening to screen people before letting them enter my community or facility?**

**A:** No, this is not generally recommended.

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While having a temperature can be a symptom of COVID-19, temperature checking is **NOT** an effective or reliable method to diagnose COVID-19.

The reasons for this are:

- Someone can have COVID-19 without having a temperature – it is even possible to have COVID-19 without having any symptoms at all.
- Mobile temperature checking devices require training and appropriate use to return correct readings. The likelihood of wrong readings when used by non-professional staff is too high for this to be effective and reliable.
- A higher temperature can indicate many things, most of which are unrelated to COVID-19, for example:
  - A side-effect of certain types of medication or vaccines
  - A wide range of other infections, illnesses and/or medical conditions unrelated to COVID-19
  - Recreational drug use
  - Pregnancy
  - Hot weather
  - Someone arrived by bike
- When someone does not have any symptoms, there is no testing that can be done to predict whether or not a person will become unwell.
- Implementing mandatory temperature testing may give rise to other problems your organisation may not be well-prepared for, including legal, regulatory, training and staff protection issues.

Instead, it is recommended to ask screening questions or require preventive self-quarantine for very sensitive situations. Refer to question 1.

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**Q: Where can I get tested for COVID-19?**

**4** **A:** COVID-19 testing is available at COVID-19 clinics and testing centres across South Australia. A full list is available [here](#).

Depending on your circumstances, you might be able to request (a) home or on-site test(s) from SA Pathology through a medical practitioner. These tests use a different testing method and are proven to be highly reliable.

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**Q: I am worried about COVID-19, but everyone in my household is well. Can I get myself and my family tested, just to make sure we don't have it?**

**5** **A:** No, this is not currently available.

A person can only get tested for COVID-19 if they meet the **current testing criteria**. These testing criteria are in place because we cannot test everyone due

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to a shortage of test kits and because frontline health workers have only limited time and resources available, and must prioritise critical cases.

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**Q: What do I do in the period between my test and receiving my results?**

**A:** if your doctor says you are well enough to go home while you wait for your test results, you should:

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- wear a surgical mask while you travel (preferably by private car) to where you will self-isolate while you await your results.
- self-isolate at home. Do not attend work, school, supermarkets or other places outside the home. Do not have visitors. If other people live in the same house as you, you must not sleep or be in the same room throughout the isolation period.
- protect yourself and others by covering coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a clean tissue, and regular handwashing.

If it is not safe for you to go home while you wait for your test results, you may be directed to stay in a hotel. The doctor can help you to arrange this. Additional support is available via the SA COVID-19 Hotline: 1800 253 787.

If you have serious symptoms you may be kept in hospital and isolated from other patients to monitor your wellbeing and prevent the virus spreading.

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**Q: Do I need a medical clearance certificate before I can go back to work?**

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**A:** If you were only self-isolating while you waited for test results (and returned a negative result), or for a mandatory 14-day period after travel or close contact with a confirmed case **AND** you have had no symptoms, then no, you do not need a clearance certificate to leave self-isolation and return to work after your mandatory isolation is complete.

It is important **NOT** to request medical clearance certificates from your GP, as this takes up valuable time they need to address urgent cases.

If you **DO or DID** have COVID-19, the COVID-19 GP Assessment Team will advise when it is safe to return to work. They will issue a confirmation of release from isolation, and will notify your usual GP, if required.

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