COVID-19 Tests: What Families Should Know

There are two types of diagnostic tests for the virus that causes COVID-19: molecular-based and antigen-based.

At Johns Hopkins All Children’s, we only accept molecular-based tests.

Molecular-based Tests (usually called PCR or RT-PCR)

- These are the most accurate tests for COVID-19, whether or not a person has symptoms.
- These tests are less likely to give a false negative (a negative result in a person who actually has the virus, even when they don’t have symptoms).
- It takes a little longer (hours to days) to get the results back, but the results are more accurate.
- The test can find the virus’s genetic material.
- Usually performed by nasal or throat swab. Some tests use saliva.

Antigen Tests (usually called Rapid Antigen Tests or Rapid Tests)

- These tests are not as accurate as molecular-based tests.
- Antigen tests are more likely to give a false negative, especially in a person who is not having symptoms.
- The test looks for certain proteins on the surface of the virus.
- Performed by nasal or throat swab.

An antibody test is not a diagnostic test. It is a blood test that often can tell whether a person had a COVID-19 infection in the past. It should not be used to identify current COVID-19 infection.

References

www.jhsphs.edu/covid-19/articles/what-are-all-the-different-kinds-of-covid-19-tests.html