

Glossary of COVID-19 Terms

Antibody/serology test

Antibodies are proteins produced by the body's immune system when it encounters foreign substances. Different antibodies recognize different markers, called **antigens**, on the outside of foreign invaders. COVID-19 **antibody tests**, also referred to as **serology tests**, examine blood samples to determine the presence of antibodies that recognize SARS-CoV-2 markers, indicating that the body had been infected previously by SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. In many diseases, the presence of antibodies confers immunity, but scientists have not verified whether this is true for COVID-19.

Antigen test

In the context of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, an **antigen** is a protein on the virus that triggers an immune response (the production of antibodies). COVID-19 **antigen tests** use cell samples from a nasal or throat swab to detect whether a specific antigen—from SARS-CoV-2—is actively infecting a patient.

Asymptomatic

An **asymptomatic** person shows no symptoms of a disease, even if they are infected with a virus. They may turn out to be **presymptomatic** (meaning they will develop symptoms over the course of the disease) or remain asymptomatic for the entire duration of their infection.

Coronavirus

A **coronavirus** is any member of a large family of viruses that sometimes produce diseases in humans. The novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is called SARS-CoV-2.

COVID-19

COVID-19 is the name of the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 and is shorthand for “novel coronavirus disease 2019.”

Diagnostic tests

In the context of COVID-19 testing, **diagnostic tests** are performed to identify infected persons who are symptomatic and/or at risk with known or suspected exposure.

False negative

A **false negative** test result shows that the virus or antibodies were not detected when they were in fact present at the time of the test. False negatives are becoming rarer in COVID-19 diagnostic tests but are still possible in even the most accurate tests.

False positive

A **false positive** test result shows that the virus or antibodies were detected when they were not in fact present at the time of the test. False positives occur in some types of COVID-19 diagnostic tests but are becoming less common as tests improve their accuracy.

PCR test or molecular test

A **PCR** (polymerase chain reaction)-based test detects the presence of viral RNA in a sample to determine whether a patient has an active COVID-19 infection. PCR tests are typically conducted by obtaining cellular samples via nasal swab and are sent to a lab for processing. These tests are sometimes referred to as molecular or nucleic acid amplification tests (NAAT).

Rapid test

A **rapid test**, in reference to COVID-19 diagnostic testing, is a test that can deliver results in 60 minutes or less because they are processed at the point of care rather than sent to a lab.

SARS-CoV-2

SARS-CoV-2 is the scientific name of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

Screening tests

In the context of COVID-19 testing, **screening tests** are performed to identify infected persons who are presymptomatic or asymptomatic and without known or suspected exposure who may be contagious, so measures can be taken to prevent further transmission.

Sensitivity

A test's **sensitivity** measures how often a test correctly produces a true positive result, meaning the patient who tested positive does in fact have the condition being tested for. The higher the sensitivity, the fewer false negative results.

Specificity

A test's **specificity** measures how often a test correctly produces a true negative result, meaning the patient who tested negative does not in fact have the condition being tested for. The higher the specificity, the fewer false positive results.

Symptomatic

A person who is **symptomatic** exhibits symptoms of a disease. In COVID-19, those symptoms are most often a dry cough, fever, shortness of breath, chills, sore throat, and loss of taste or smell.

Surveillance tests



In the context of COVID-19 testing, **surveillance tests** are performed on groups of people with no individual result reporting. The goal of surveillance testing is to understand prevalence of infection at the population or cohort level.

Sources: WHO, Kaiser Family Foundation, Merriam-Webster, MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia