

## FAQs for PCR Testing of Health Care Personnel for SARS-CoV-2 (Updated May 18, 2020, replaces May 4, 2020)

This FAQ guidance describes the PCR test for SARS-CoV-2 and our current understanding of the meaning of positive and negative PCR results in symptomatic and asymptomatic health care personnel (HCP). As of May 4, NYP will be offering the PCR test for SARS-CoV-2 to include asymptomatic HCP who have had contact with someone at home or at work with COVID-19. This expanded testing aims to further help protect our team members and patients.

**HCP who are SARS-CoV-2-positive, even without any symptoms, will be asked to self-isolate at home** as described below and advised by Workforce Health & Safety (WHS) when they can report back to work.

*Please note:* PCR testing is **not** recommended for asymptomatic HCP who have **not** been in contact with someone at work or at home with confirmed COVID-19 or symptoms of COVID-19.

### 1. What is the difference between SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19?

*SARS-CoV-2 is the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19 illness.*

### 2. What kinds of tests are used to determine if people have COVID-19?

*There are two different types of tests for COVID-19.*

- *One is a nasopharyngeal (NP) swab used to detect the RNA of SARS-CoV-2 virus*
- *One is the serology blood test used to detect antibodies to SARS-CoV-2.*

### 3. How is the nasopharyngeal (NP) swab test done?

*To do the NP test to detect SARS-CoV-2 virus, a sterile, small, cotton-tipped swab is gently passed into the nose back to the nasopharynx to obtain respiratory tract secretions, rotated and removed and placed in viral transport media and brought to the clinical microbiology laboratories.*

### 4. What does the NP PCR test measure?

*The clinical microbiology laboratories at Weill Cornell and Columbia perform PCR assays on the NP swab specimens to detect the SARS-CoV-2 viral genetic material (RNA). PCR assays can detect live virus or dead virus or fragments of virus.*

### 5. What are the current NYP recommendations for testing HCP using the NP PCR test?

***The NP PCR test is currently recommended for two groups of HCP.***

- ***HCP with symptoms to see if their symptoms are from SARS-CoV-2. Symptoms of COVID-19 include: documented fever or subjective fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, chills or shaking chills, congestion/runny nose, diarrhea, alterations of taste, or loss of smell.***
- ***HCP without symptoms who have had contact with someone at work or at home with laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 or with symptoms consistent with COVID-19. HCP without symptoms will only be tested ONCE.***

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**5. In HCP with symptoms, what does a positive NP PCR test result mean?**

*A positive PCR test from a HCP with symptoms means that a person has COVID-19 and can infect others. These HCP need to be isolated at home and need to be cleared by WHS to return to work. Generally, the following criteria need to be met:*

- *At least 10 days have passed since the onset of symptoms*
- *At least 72 hours have passed without fever without the use of antipyretic medications, e.g., Tylenol, ibuprofen*
- *Marked improvement in symptoms*

*\*Note: When these HCP return to work, they need to continue to use all protective measures against COVID-19 because we don't know if someone can be re-infected with SARS-CoV-2.*

**6. In HCP without symptoms, what does a positive NP PCR test result mean?**

*The PCR test can detect both live and dead virus (or viral RNA fragments). A positive PCR result in someone without symptoms could mean any of the following:*

- *A person (with or without symptoms) has recovered from the virus, but is still shedding the virus and could transmit SARS-CoV-2 to others.*
- *A person (with or without symptoms) has recovered from the virus and the PCR is detecting dead virus or viral RNA fragments and SARS-CoV-2 cannot be transmitted to others.*
- *A person is pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic, meaning they may or may not develop symptoms, but are carrying the virus. Asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic people who are PCR-positive can sometimes transmit SARS-CoV-2 to others, although less frequently than those with symptoms.*

*That is why asymptomatic HCP who are SARS-CoV-2-positive will need to self-isolate at home. These HCP need to be cleared to return to work by WHS. Generally, these asymptomatic HCP can return to work as long as they remain asymptomatic after 10 days have passed since the date that their NP swab was obtained. The NP swab does not need to be repeated before the HCP can return to work.*

**These HCP should be provided with the *Guidance for NYP HCP with COVID-19* to help protect their household members.**

*\*Note: When these HCP return to work, they still need to continue to use all protective measures against COVID-19 because we don't know if someone can be re-infected with SARS-CoV-2.*

**7. Does a HCP who is SARS-CoV2-PCR-positive need a follow-up NEGATIVE PCR test to return to work?**

*No, HCP can return to work as per WHS clearance criteria described above. No further PCR testing is required to return to work.*

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8. In HCP with symptoms, what does a negative NP PCR test result mean?

*People with COVID-19-like symptoms can have a negative test for several reasons.*

- *A negative test from a HCP who previously had symptoms and is now well may mean that a person has cleared the virus and can't spread the virus to others.*
- *This may be a false negative test meaning that the person does have COVID-19, but that the PCR test did not detect the virus because the level of viral RNA was below the limit of detection. Levels of viral RNA are usually highest in the first 5 days of illness.*
- *False negative tests can also occur due to inadequate or improper NP swab collection.*
- *Sometimes people with symptoms can have a negative test because they have other reasons for their symptoms such as seasonal allergies or asthma.*

9. In HCP without symptoms, what does a negative NP PCR test result mean?

*It is likely that a person without symptoms with a negative NP PCR test does not have COVID-19. These HCP should continue to self-monitor for symptoms of COVID-19.*

10. How long will it take asymptomatic HCP to get their PCR test result back and how will they be told about their test results?

*It will take about 48-72 hours to get the PCR test results back. WHS will call HCP with their test results and guidance for return to work if the test result is SARS-CoV-2-positive.*

11. Can an asymptomatic HCP work while waiting for their PCR test result?

*Yes. The asymptomatic HCP can continue to work while waiting for their test result. They should continue to wear a mask whenever they are around others and wear appropriate PPE.*

12. What does an indeterminate NP PCR test mean?

*Occasionally a person will have an indeterminate NP PCR test result. This is considered a positive result and represents a low level of virus. It does **NOT** need to be repeated.*

13. What does an invalid NP PCR test mean?

*Occasionally, a person will have an invalid NP PCR test result, which is the result of excessive mucus in the sample, which interferes with the test. This person **SHOULD** have a repeat NP swab sent for SARS-CoV-2 testing.*