# PCR vs Rapid Antigen Test

**What they are, differences and when to use one versus the other**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCR TEST</th>
<th>RAPID ANTIGEN TEST (AT-HOME)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td><strong>WHAT IS IT</strong></td>
<td>Nasal or throat swab lab-processed test (includes all testing performed at UHS/RSF)</td>
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| **WHAT IT TESTS FOR** | Viral genetic material  
Best for early diagnosis of infection | Viral protein  
Best for early release from isolation (if eligible) |
| **WHEN YOU SHOULD GET THIS TEST** | Symptoms concerning for COVID-19  
(isolate while you await results)  
3-5 days after close contact with someone with COVID-19 | - If you have COVID, getting better/ have no symptoms, & want to return to regular activities sooner than 10 days (but no earlier than 6 days)  
- If you have new symptoms, & already had COVID within last 90 days  
- If you have symptoms, & cannot get access to timely PCR testing: best to take the day AFTER symptoms develop, or do 2 tests 24 hours apart if the first one is negative |
| **WHEN NOT TO USE THIS TEST** | Do not repeat PCR tests if you already had COVID-19 within the past 90 days (may be intermittently positive, even if you are no longer infectious/ill) | You CAN use if you don’t have symptoms, e.g. pre-gathering or 3-5 days post-contact, but high risk of false negative (not super reassuring) |
| **HOW LONG RESULTS TAKE** | Most take 24-48 hours (UHS has limited numbers of rapid PCR tests resulting within 2-4 hours, currently prioritized for symptomatic dorm residents) | 15-30 minutes |
| **ACCURACY OF RESULTS** | Highly sensitive, highly specific.  
In other words: both positive and negative results are highly reliable if timing/use is right | Less sensitive  
If it’s positive, you can likely rely on the result (especially when there is a lot of COVID around)  
If it is negative, & you have high suspicion/concern, you should retake an antigen test in 24 hours or take a PCR test & stay home in the meantime |

More info: uhs.berkeley.edu/covid