



RE: 491 - 4/3/20 - UP - UPDATE: Interim Guidelines for Collecting Clinical Specimens for COVID-19 Testing

MESSAGE:

- Nasopharyngeal (NP) specimens are the strongly preferred choice for COVID-19 testing and are thought to be the most sensitive testing site.
- If NP swabs are not available, the following are acceptable alternatives to submit for COVID-19 testing:
 - An oropharyngeal (OP) specimen, or
 - A nasal mid-turbinate (NMT) swab, or
 - An anterior nares specimen (NS)
- Consultation with the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) is required before testing at DOH. Please call 1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258) or your local health department.
- Commercial and in-house laboratory tests do not require consultation with DOH. Please follow those laboratory specimen collection instructions.
- Positive test results should be reported through the Pennsylvania electronic reporting system, PA-NEDSS.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued updated interim guidelines for collecting, handling, and testing clinical specimens from persons for COVID-19 testing. The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) is providing these updated guidelines with emphasis on the acceptable alternative specimens.

All testing for COVID-19 should be conducted in consultation with a healthcare provider. The guidance below addresses options for self-collection of specimens once a clinical determination has been made to pursue COVID-19 testing.

For initial diagnostic testing for COVID-19, CDC recommends collecting and testing an upper respiratory specimen. **Nasopharyngeal specimen is the preferred choice for swab-based SARS-CoV-2 testing.** When collection of a nasopharyngeal swab is not possible, the following are acceptable alternatives:

- An oropharyngeal (OP) specimen collected by a healthcare professional, OR
- A nasal mid-turbinate (NMT) swab collected by a healthcare professional or by onsite self-collection (using a flocked tapered swab), OR
- An anterior nares specimen (NS) collected by a healthcare professional or by onsite self-collection (using a round foam swab).

For NS, a single polyester swab with a plastic shaft should be used to sample both nares. NS or NMT swabs should be placed in a transport tube containing either viral transport medium, Amies transport medium, or sterile saline.

If multiple swabs are collected from a single patient, they should be combined in a single tube to maximize test sensitivity and limit testing resources.

In hospitalized patients only, CDC also recommends testing lower respiratory tract specimens, if available. For patients who develop a productive cough, sputum should be collected and tested for SARS-CoV-2. The induction of sputum is not recommended. When it is clinically indicated (e.g., those receiving invasive mechanical ventilation), a lower respiratory tract aspirate or bronchoalveolar lavage sample should be collected and tested as a lower respiratory tract specimen.

If an autopsy is performed for a suspected COVID-19 case, collection of the following postmortem specimens is recommended:

- Upper respiratory tract swab: NP swab
- Lower respiratory tract swab: one lung swab from each lung (combine in one tube)

Specimens should be collected as soon as possible once a decision has been made to pursue COVID-19 testing, regardless of the time of symptom onset. Maintain [proper infection control](#) when collecting specimens.

For testing at DOH laboratories, consultation with DOH is required. Please call 1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258) or your local health department.