

Covid-19: Testing For International Travel Purposes

Information on testing for travel, including testing following recent COVID-19 infection

The following guidance is based on rules for arrivals in England, and different rules may apply for those arriving in [Wales](#), [Scotland](#), and [Northern Ireland](#).

The [NHS Test and Trace service](#) should not be used for those needing a test before or after international travel, and a negative NHS test cannot be used to end the self-isolation period early (a fine may be imposed if an NHS test result is used this way).

COVID-19 testing for international travel purposes or for the [test and release scheme](#) on return to the UK is only available as a private service.

COVID-19 tests in the UK

A number of tests for COVID are available; these can determine if:

1. COVID-19 infection is present at the time the test was performed. These include:
 - Nucleic acid amplification tests e.g. polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test: this detects genetic material of the virus.
 - Antigen test: this detects material (antigen) of the virus usually a surface protein e.g., Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test.
2. COVID-19 antibody is present from a blood test suggesting past infection, but not necessarily immunity to further exposure to COVID-19 infection.

Many different tests are in use or being evaluated. These include samples taken with swabs from the back of the throat and nasal passages, or saliva samples. Test results may provide results within minutes or require processing in a laboratory accredited by the [United Kingdom Accredited Service](#).

A [CE mark](#) on a COVID-19 test kit shows that it is fit for the purpose and meets legal requirements relating to safety. The CE mark has been replaced by the [UKCA \(UK Conformity Assessed\)](#).

Limitations of COVID-19 tests

No test is 100% reliable, even those with valid CE or UKCA marks. Results are only valid at the time they are taken. More details about this are available from [the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency](#).

COVID-19 testing before travel from the UK

Some countries require proof of recent COVID-19 testing prior to entry, or require travellers to take one or more tests on arrival. Check the [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office \(FCDO\) foreign travel advice](#) (see the summary, health, and entry requirements sections). The [UK-based embassy of the destination country](#) can also be contacted if further details are required.

When arranging a test, travellers should check the requirements of the country (or countries) they are travelling to and consider the time it will take to process the test and get the result. A charge will be made for testing and any medical certificate confirming a negative COVID-19 test.

The rules for children may differ depending on their age and travel destination requirements [1].

COVID-19 testing for return from international travel

[The rules for international travel to England](#) are subject to change. Travellers can sign up for [email alerts](#) to be notified of updates to the rules.

All travellers must:

- [complete a passenger locator form \[in the 48 hours before arrival in England\]](#).
- book, pay for and take any [COVID-19 tests that are required](#).

Please note that different rules may apply depending on your vaccination status and country of vaccination. Different testing and quarantine rules also apply for children (see links below).

Transit stops

Travellers must follow the rules for the highest risk country or territory visited in the previous 10 days, including transit stops. Guidance on [transiting through a red list country on your way to England](#) should be followed.

COVID-19 testing for travel following recent infection

Some countries relax their entry rules once a specified time has passed since the traveller tested positive for COVID-19, and/or can demonstrate that they have immunity following infection, and/or have proof of recovery. Travellers must check the [rules for their destination](#) and for the UK on return.

In England, history of previous infection does not currently change the entry requirements. Travellers must still book and pay for the relevant tests, as required based on their destination. COVID-19 testing for international travel purposes is only available as a private service.

Following natural infection, the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test can remain positive for up to three months, but the average is around 17 days [2,3]. Where a choice of tests is allowed under a

country's COVID-19 testing rules relating to travel, those who have recently recovered from COVID-19 but are no longer infectious, could consider using an antigen test e.g. a lateral flow device (LFD) test. LFD tests have a lower sensitivity than the nucleic acid tests e.g. PCR, so they are less likely to return a positive result from a historic infection and after completing required self-isolation [4]. The LFD test must meet the [minimum performance standards](#) for England; other countries may also specify minimum standards.

REFERENCES

1. [Department of Health and Social Care. NHS COVID Pass. Last updated 4 January 2022. \[Accessed 6 January 2022\]](#)
2. [Crozier, A. Rajan, S. Buchan, I. and McKee, M. Put to the test: use of rapid testing technologies for covid-19 BMJ 2021;372:n208 \[Accessed 6 January 2022\]](#)
3. [UK Health Security Agency Immunisation against infectious disease Chapter 14 a: COVID-19. Last updated 24 January 2021 \[Accessed 6 January 2022\]](#)
4. [Department for Transport. Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) testing before you travel to England. Updated 5 January 2022 \[Accessed 6 January 2022\]](#)

Published Date: 10 Dec 2020

Updated Date: 06 Jan 2022