



Date:
Dec. 4, 2020

MEMO

Title: COVID-19 Testing and Lab Analysis Update

To: Ontario Hospitals (CEOs and Communications), Ontario Hospital Association

CC: Ontario Health Regional Leads

From: Ontario Health

Below is our latest update on COVID-19 testing and lab analysis to help keep you abreast of key developments.

Fast Facts:

- Ontario has completed more than 6.3 million lab-based polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests to date
 - Ontario's testing rate, at more than 425,438 per million population, is the highest of any province or territory in Canada
- Result turnaround time continues to be a top priority for Ontario's lab network
- As of Dec. 3, 78.5% of COVID-19 test results were available within two days (based on a rolling seven-day average)
 - Turnaround times have been impacted primarily by isolated specimen-shipping issues
 - Turnaround times typically fluctuate +/- 5% due to variables that are hard to control, such as human resources, equipment downtimes and specimen transportation
 - Seven-day average testing volume stood at 48,000, up 12% from the previous week (on Dec. 3, we completed 56,001 tests)
- Ontario has completed more than 2.7 million tests since the [latest guidance](#) was issued by the Chief Medical Officer of Health on Sept. 24
- Testing is available at 171 assessment centres across the province
- Testing also continues at 177 pharmacies for eligible asymptomatic individuals
- More than 40 labs (hospital, public health, and private/community) continue to carry out specimen analysis
- Provincially, more than 100 pop-up testing events for vulnerable populations have been completed since September

Provincial Diagnostic Network

With health system partners, we continue the work to ensure all specimens are sent to a lab that is best positioned to analyze results quickly—regardless of the point of collection or the

lab's location. Every day, we balance the number of tests sent to each lab, including strategically directing specimens to labs that have capacity to ensure appropriate load balance. This is preferable to rerouting, as that can add to turnaround times.

The transportation of specimens from assessment centres to the lab network involves careful logistics and routing using couriers and Ornge, the province's air ambulance service. Ontario Health is working with all labs and regions to provide continuous transportation improvements. Ongoing data analysis helps us work together to make adjustments to ensure efficient workflows between specimen centres to the labs, and within the labs themselves, ultimately to improve turnaround times. Samples from congregate settings in outbreaks also continue to be prioritized.

Lab Automation Acceleration

Ontario has begun to accelerate lab automation first introduced in September. Several assessment centres and labs are now using barcodes and handheld scanners to improve efficiency and workflows.

As of mid-November, 16 of the highest-volume labs and 28 assessment centres had gone live. Initial priority has been directed at assessment centres and long-term care homes with high volumes of paper requisitions and longer turnaround times. The goal is to have several more assessment centres onboard by the end of December. Participating assessment centres report early positive results.

Community Testing

Pop-up, or community testing sites provide additional access to testing, for vulnerable and at-risk communities. Decisions about pop-ups are made at the local and regional level.

Locations are strategically determined based on need. Pop-ups have been in place for many months, including before assessment centres moved to appointment-based testing, and more are now being used to target at-risk populations, including people who are experiencing homelessness.

At any given time, there are a multitude of pop-ups in the province. Pop-ups are walk-in rather than appointment-based because they are targeted to specific neighbourhoods and designed to be easily accessible, serving, for example, those who may not have access to transit.

Local planning resources identify the appropriate locations, timing, and communication for the pop-ups—which can be temporary based on immediate need or can evolve into assessment-centre satellite sites if ongoing need is determined.

Pop-ups can be community-led, hospital-led, or public health unit-led. They are typically short-term efforts to extend testing access beyond assessment centres and are very targeted to enable local access to key at-risk populations/neighbourhoods.

Long-Term Care

The Ministry of Long-Term Care recently released directions to long-term care homes on testing in communities with greater transmission rates. Long-term care homes in public health unit regions in the Orange-Restrict, Red-Control and Lockdown levels, now require staff, essential caregivers and support workers who provide direct care to residents to be tested for COVID-19 weekly and show proof of a negative test result. Ontario Health and partners are now actively supporting long-term care homes in these efforts.

Introduction of Rapid Testing

The province has begun to roll out two new rapid tests approved and supplied by Health Canada. The goal is to support rapid case detection in rural and remote regions where transportation/routing of tests may delay turnaround times, in hospitals and long-term care homes, in areas experiencing outbreaks and for serial testing.

Rapid tests are currently intended to complement—not replace—existing lab-based polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, as they are less sensitive than the lab-based PCR testing, the gold-standard for COVID-19 diagnosis.

The following two rapid tests are being rolled out in Ontario:

- ID NOW™
 - To support early outbreak investigation
 - Is a molecular test, like lab-based PCR analysis, but less sensitive
 - Uses isothermal technology, proprietary enzymes, and constant temperature to get quick genetic amplification via a portable analyzer device
 - Test results are available in as little as 15 to 20 minutes, although, depending on site location/volume, may take longer
 - The first round of these rapid tests has been deployed to 20 locations across Ontario, with more expected in coming weeks
 - Ontario is expecting another shipment from the federal government shortly, in addition to the 98,000 already received

- Panbio™
 - To support screening via serial rapid identification
 - A rapid antigen test that detects antibodies to the virus that causes COVID-19
 - Ontario has received 1.4 million Panbio™ tests so far, with another 1.4 million expected by the end of December
 - Requires no special instrumentation or analyzer, is portable, and can provide results in as little as 15 to 20 minutes, although, depending on the site/volume, may take longer
 - Currently under a time-limited pilot evaluation for participating employers in the public, private and non-profit sector, prioritizing access for health care settings, essential frontline settings, and congregate settings

Over the coming weeks, the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Long-Term Care—supported by Ontario Health, Public Health Ontario, and other health system partners—are evaluating how rapid testing may be further deployed and leveraged, based on data and evidence.

Thank you again to all our system partners for your collaborative, ongoing efforts to deliver timely and efficient COVID-19 testing and results across the province.

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