

MAKING SENSE OF COVID19 TEST RESULTS: INFORMATION FOR CARE HOMES REGARDING PATIENTS DISCHARGED BACK WHO HAVE HAD COVID19

Many care home staff may be worried when their care homes are asked to take individuals who have had a COVID19 infection. Care home staff may be rightly fearful that this could introduce infection in the care homes. The results of tests can also be very confusing. The purpose of this note is to try and give staff the latest information about what we know. This information is based on advice from experts at Public Health England as well as clinicians in NHS Vale of York CCG and the City of York Council.

- **What is the test used for COVID19?**

Firstly, patients in hospital are tested for COVID19 using a special test called **PCR**. This involves a swab sample taken from the patient's nose or throat. The sample is then processed to look for fragments of the virus genetic material.

This is a sensitive test and if the patient is shedding these virus fragments the test will detect that.

The test does not tell you if the virus is “viable” (i.e. “live” and can spread and cause infections) or “not viable” (in other words “dead” and will not cause infections). A positive test can only tell us that viral genetic material has been found.

- **What does the test result mean?**

What the test result means depends on the stage of the infection.

TEST RESULTS EARLY IN THE INFECTION (FIRST WEEK)

A **POSITIVE** test in the early stage of the disease (first week) means the patient most likely has a COVID19 infection at that time.

A **NEGATIVE** test most likely means they do not have COVID19 infection.

TEST RESULTS LATER ON IN THE INFECTION (BEYOND A WEEK)

Studies have shown that the patient sheds a lot of virus around the time when they first have symptoms. But, the amount of virus shed reduces over time. Many infected people recover and stop shedding virus fragments within 8 to 9 days. If you test them after they have recovered, you will get a NEGATIVE test result.

A few people, especially those with weakened immune systems, may shed virus fragments for much longer. Some studies show they can shed virus for more than 4 weeks. If you test them, you will get a POSITIVE test result. **This does not mean they are infectious!**

Remember, all the test is detecting now are fragments of the virus. Studies have shown that the virus detected in these people are not viable. In other words, they are not shedding “live” virus that can cause infections. It is for this reason that ***re-testing of patients is not needed.***

- **So what does it mean for care home residents who have had the COVID19 infection?**

If the resident had symptoms that started more than 14 days ago and they have not had a fever for 48 hours without medication, they can safely be assumed not to be infectious. They no longer need isolation and can be safely admitted to a care home. There is no need to re-test them for COVID19.

If they have symptoms that started more than 14 days ago and still have a fever, get medical advice.

Be aware that for some people who have recovered from an infection, they may have a cough that lasts for many weeks afterwards. This is a side-effect of the infection. But they are not infectious and do not need to be isolated.