

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
2020 – PAHAN – 491 – 4-3-UPD
UPDATE: Interim Guidelines for Collecting Clinical Specimens for COVID-19 Testing



DATE:	4/3/2020
TO:	Health Alert Network
FROM:	Rachel Levine, MD, Secretary of Health
SUBJECT:	UPDATE: Interim Guidelines for Collecting Clinical Specimens for COVID-19 Testing
DISTRIBUTION:	Statewide
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This transmission is a “Health Update”: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

HOSPITALS: PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, PEDIATRIC, NURSING AND LABORATORY STAFF IN YOUR HOSPITAL; **EMS COUNCILS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **FQHCs:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE **LOCAL HEALTH JURISDICTIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE AS APPROPRIATE; **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:** PLEASE DISTRIBUTE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIP; **LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES:** PLEASE SHARE WITH ALL MEDICAL, INFECTION CONTROL, AND NURSING STAFF IN YOUR FACILITY

- 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.

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of April 3, 2020 but may be modified in the future. We will continue to post updated information regarding the most common questions about this subject.