Healthcare Improvement Scotland

Position regarding testing for SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 in Independent Healthcare Services

General position

Healthcare Improvement Scotland regards testing for COVID-19 infection which is not part of the NHS or government arrangements, as non-urgent healthcare. Therefore, in line with the advice from Scottish Government in their letter dated 7 April it should NOT be undertaken by independent healthcare services at this time.

Independent Clinics who wish to support the NHS with testing or in any other way can find out more about how to do this on the Scottish Government Website here.

Exception for asymptomatic testing in offshore key workers.

It is recognised that outbreaks in remote and closed settings, particularly offshore installations, can be challenging to manage, furthermore patients with COVID-19 may deteriorate rapidly, so action to reduce the risk of this happening offshore is important. While the reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test is not generally recommended as a screening test for COVID-19 in asymptomatic people, there have been reports of positive results amongst asymptomatic offshore workers. It is therefore possible that this screening has prevented some infected workers from going offshore.

However using RT-PCR as a screening test is not infallible. The key limitation is that a negative test result in an asymptomatic person does not guarantee that the person is not infected, is not incubating infection, or is not subsequently exposed to infection after the test was taken.

If an independent clinic that already provides occupational health services to the oil and gas industry is currently or intends to provide RT-PCR tests to screen individuals for COVID-19 before they are allowed to work offshore the clinic must inform Healthcare Improvement Scotland that they are offering this service. Further, it must be made clear to individuals being tested and their employer, in writing, that:

- A positive test result in an asymptomatic person should be taken as indicating COVID-19 infection, and the person should immediately enter 7 days self-isolation, and their household members 14 days household isolation, in line with Government advice
- A negative test result in an asymptomatic person does not rule out the possibility of infection
- A negative test result in an asymptomatic person does not rule out the possibility that they are incubating the infection
- A negative test results in an asymptomatic person does not rule out the possibility that they have been exposed to the infection after the test was taken
- Offshore installations should therefore remain alert to the potential for an imported case of COVID-19 even if all workers are screened by RT-PCR prior to being allowed offshore
- Offshore installations should therefore maintain all preventive processes and procedures to minimise the risk of transmission on an offshore installation (e.g. social distancing, environmental cleaning, hand hygiene, cough etiquette)
• All offshore workers should remain vigilant for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 even after a negative RT-PCR test result and should enter immediate isolation and seek medical attention should these develop.

Services are reminded that SARS-CoV-2 is a notifiable organism and COVID-19 is a notifiable disease under the emergency legislation brought into force to support the nation deal with the pandemic. If an individual is tested and they are positive for the virus then your diagnostic laboratory must, within 10 days of a positive result, notify the health board in whose area the diagnostic laboratory is situated, in writing, of the person's name, address, sex, date of birth and NHS identifier (if known).

Additional information about testing

The following information is provided to answer some frequent questions that arise in relation to testing for COVID-19. It is not part of the position statement;

Where can I find out more about the eligibility for clinical testing?


Where can I find out more about the eligibility for key worker testing?


Keyworker testing is currently available through the UK keyworker testing system (https://self-referral.test-for-coronavirus.service.gov.uk/) or through Health Board testing systems. In both cases testing is offered to keyworkers who are symptomatic, or to their symptomatic household members, as a negative test can allow the keyworker to return to work earlier than the current isolation rules would otherwise allow.

What are antibody detection tests?

Antibody detection tests is often used to detect previous infection. While there are antibody tests that can be marketed in the UK, none have been validated. Therefore, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Public Health Scotland do not currently support their use during the pandemic in any circumstances.

What are Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction tests?

Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) tests are used to detect current infection by detecting viral components which are present during infection in samples such as nasopharyngeal secretions. RT-PCR assays are very sensitive and the gold standard for respiratory viruses. The tests in use are analytically very sensitive but the timing and quality of clinical samples are important determinants of clinical diagnostic sensitivity. The test can detect viral particles even once the infectious period has passed, so test results must be interpreted alongside other clinical and epidemiological factors.
RT-PCR testing is aimed at people who have possible symptoms of COVID-19. RT-PCR is not routinely used to screen people who are asymptomatic.

Further, Health Protection Scotland has produced a frequently asked questions document in relation to testing and we would like to draw your attention to the following question and answer.

*How reliable are tests performed outside of NHS services?*

Some private laboratories and manufacturers are offering products for the diagnosis of COVID-19 infection in community settings. Health Protection Scotland has not assessed these tests independently and therefore cannot endorse or comment further on the use of specific products in terms of their appropriateness or reliability.

All tests that are used in the NHS are validated to ensure that they are sensitive (detect a high proportion of those with the disease) and specific (a high proportion of people with a positive result actually have the disease) and supporting quality control systems are in place as part of the delivery of test results. There is the potential for harm if action is taken on the basis of non-validated test results; they may provide false reassurance if falsely negative (e.g. household isolation lifted in someone affected by COVID-19) or a wrong diagnosis of COVID-19 if falsely positive (e.g. unnecessary anxiety and interventions).

Our expert advice is therefore clear; an unvalidated test is an unreliable test and an unreliable test is worse than no test at all.”

The complete set of HPS FAQs is available here - [https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/web-resources-container/covid-19-laboratory-testing-frequently-asked-questions/](https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/web-resources-container/covid-19-laboratory-testing-frequently-asked-questions/)