

Community Update

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Testing Update

By Cynthia Morrow, MD, MPH

Every New Year brings hope. Even though the first weeks of January have brought the highest number of cases we have seen locally at any point in the pandemic, we continue to have hope as we look to the future. We remain hopeful that one of the consequences of the Omicron surge will be that we finally have a meaningful sustained decrease in COVID-19 activity. We remain hopeful that we will finally have a vaccine for children under the age of five. With all that we have learned over the past two years, we remain hopeful that 2022 will be a much better year with respect to the pandemic.

But hope is not enough. The high levels of transmission in our communities have placed access to testing in the spotlight. Pharmacies and healthcare providers had been tasked with providing the bulk of testing opportunities over the previous year. And as demand for testing quickly outstripped their supply at year-end, local health departments stepped up.

Testing helps prevent the spread of COVID-19 and should be used alongside our best tools to stop this pandemic—getting vaccinated, getting boosted, wearing a mask in indoor public settings, and staying home when we are ill.

Although there are a number of test options available, today we'll focus on two of the most common types:

Rapid at-home tests: Also known as self-tests, these tests are usually sold as kits with specific instructions for the user to follow to get results within minutes. Most tests are rapid antigen tests which do not have the same rate of accuracy as PCR tests, though they are relatively easy to use and can be used when a lab test is not available.

- Where can rapid tests be found?: Rapid tests are sold over the counter at most pharmacies (and now covered by most insurance), and are also available while supplies last at some local libraries. In addition, every household is now eligible to order up to four free tests through the White House's new online portal at [covidtests.gov](https://www.covidtests.gov).

Viral PCR tests: Considered the gold standard in terms of accuracy, PCR tests look for viral particles in the body, even in people who don't have symptoms. Typically PCR tests are analyzed in a laboratory and it can take 24-48 hours for people to receive their results.

- Where can PCR tests be found?: Locally, PCR tests can be found at healthcare facilities, pharmacies, as well as at our health department community testing events.

Because of increased demand and long wait times at the community events, we have transitioned to appointment-based scheduling. While the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts (RCAHD) were able to ramp up events to expand testing capacity to over 1000 people per week, we found that we still had to turn people away who had waited hours when our supplies ran out.

We are thankful that we now have a community testing center near the former Sears at Valley View Mall. We will be able to offer free PCR testing Monday-Thursday, 9:30-5pm. Appointments are available online the day before, or call 877-ASK-VDH3. Results are typically back within 24-48 hours.

In addition, we are committed to offering testing convenient to our more rural residents: this week we will hold events Wednesday at Dabney Lancaster College and Thursday at Fincastle Baptist. These events are also by appointment. Community testing events for the upcoming week will be announced on our website and social media. Please visit <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/roanoke/> or call 877-ASK-VDH to make an appointment.

We are thankful for the amazing partnerships that we have strengthened over the past two years. Together, we have weathered the past two years. And we know, no matter what 2022 brings, our community will persevere.