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**SUBJECT:** Changes to Specimen Collection for COVID-19  
**Date:** March 2, 2020  
**Pages:** 2  
**To:** Primary Care Providers, Emergency Departments,  
Infection Control Practitioners  
**From:** Dr. Nicola Mercer, Medical Officer of Health and CEO

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Public Health Ontario Laboratory (PHOL) has updated its recommendations regarding specimen collection for COVID-19. Outpatients who require testing should have a single specimen collected (NPS preferred). In-patients who require testing should continue to have two or more specimens submitted.

### PHOL Specimen Collection Recommendations<sup>1</sup>

For patients not admitted to hospital (including those in ER):

**A single upper respiratory tract specimen will be accepted for COVID-19 testing.** Upper respiratory tract specimens include a nasopharyngeal swab (NPS) **OR** viral throat swab collected in universal transport medium. NPS is preferred over a viral throat swab – information available to date suggests that a NPS has higher sensitivity than a throat swab for COVID-19 detection.

For in-patients:

For in-patients, it is recommended to collect a minimum of two specimens, from two different sites:

- Upper respiratory tract: submit both a nasopharyngeal swab (NPS) **AND** viral throat swab collected in universal transport medium.
- Lower respiratory tract specimens: submit when possible.
- Sputum: collect if patient has a productive cough. Do not induce.

Serology for COVID-19 is not available.

For patients who require STAT testing, where results are required to make timely patient care decisions in urgent or emergency circumstances:

- STAT samples must be shipped separately from routine specimens to **the shipping and receiving dock at 661 University, Toronto Ontario.** For delivery instructions please see the Public Health Ontario website.
- STAT samples must be placed in a clearly marked package indicating 'STAT' and handled in accordance with the Canadian Biosafety Standards and shipped in accordance with the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Regulations.
- Failure to ship separately will delay testing, primarily due to delays in transportation, and will be processed as a routine sample.

The most recent guidance about COVID-19 testing, including the COVID-19 Test Requisition and additional information about specimen collection are available on the Public Health Ontario website. **If you are planning to test your patient for COVID-19, please notify WDGPH as soon as possible.**

Health care providers can speak with a Public Health Nurse about COVID-19 by calling WDGPH's Coronavirus Call Centre at 1-800-265-7293 ext. 7006 Monday - Friday 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.; after hours 1-877-884-8653

## References

1. Public Health Ontario. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Testing. [Updated 2020 Feb 28; cited 2020 Mar 02]. Available from: <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/laboratory-services/test-information-index/wuhan-novel-coronavirus>

## For more information, refer to contact or website:

**Name/Title:** WDG Public Health, Coronavirus Call Centre  
**Contact:** 519-822-2715 or 1-800-265-7293 ext. 7006; after hours 1-877-884-8653  
[wdgpublichealth.ca/hcpcoronavirus](http://wdgpublichealth.ca/hcpcoronavirus)