

COVID Testing before Holiday Gatherings

On December 6, 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its COVID-19 testing guidance to recommend testing for COVID-19 before holiday gatherings, regardless of vaccination status.

Because the holidays in 2020 were celebrated virtually for the most part through online platforms such as Zooms and Facetime, people are eager to get together in person this year. The COVID-19 vaccines and boosters, in combination with following the recommended COVID-19 safety guidelines such as hand washing and wearing a mask, have allowed people to begin opening their doors to family and friends once again. However, it is not without risk; COVID cases are on the rise once again, and the omicron variant has been spreading rapidly across the country.

In order to protect yourself and loved ones, especially vulnerable populations (young children who are not yet eligible to be vaccinated, older adults including grandparents, and those with compromised immune systems), a simple and quick COVID-19 test should be done before you gather.

Eileen Knightly, chief nursing officer at OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois, discusses the importance of testing before your holiday gathering – including who should test and when.

“If you’re fully vaccinated and you’re boosted, you should still test. If you’re going to be with just your immediate family – meaning the people who live in your household with you – then testing probably isn’t necessary because you’re all together in a household. But if you’re going to bring together multiple households – meaning more than one household – everyone in the group should be tested,” says Knightly.

Many retail drug stores offer rapid tests by appointment. Additionally, there are [community testing sites](#) and [FDA-approved home tests](#) that can be used. If you do choose to test at home, the CDC has released guidance on [self-testing](#) as well. It is recommended to schedule or purchase your test early, in order to ensure you have it in time for the holidays.

So you have ordered your at-home test or are looking to schedule a rapid test. The next step is determining when to do it.

“I think people are really looking to reengage, and that’s wonderful. I think your test should be done very close to the time you’re going to gather. So, for example, if you’re going to gather at four o’clock and go to mass, really make sure that you’re testing sometime that afternoon. It would be great if you could get a quick PCR test somewhere – but if not, the home tests really are fairly accurate,” Knightly explains.

While COVID-19 testing is recommended by the CDC for anyone who plans to attend a gathering this holiday season regardless of symptoms or vaccination status, it is especially important to test if you are experiencing any symptoms, including minor symptoms such as a cough, stuffy nose, body aches, chills, shortness of breath, fatigue, fever, diarrhea, and vomiting. OSF HealthCare does offer [COVID-19 testing](#) for those who are symptomatic.

If you are feeling sick and get a negative COVID test result, Knightly advises it is still important to take extra precautions and avoid holiday gatherings this year when feeling ill.

“The more we spread this, the worse it is, so I would say that if you’re not well you really need to stay home. It’s a really important time for us to really make sure that – and wearing the mask helps, certainly washing our hands and keeping a distance – but if you’re not well, then you should stay home. It’s important that if you’re not well and you test and you’re negative, a couple days later if you are still not well then you should retest. But certainly quarantining is really important,” advises Knightly.

Health officials are not recommending avoiding your holiday celebrations altogether, but getting a rapid COVID test before you gather with loved ones is the best way to ensure you are celebrating safely.

Knightly adds: “We had a significant surge after Thanksgiving so I think it’s going to be really important for everyone to be all in. I think this is something that everyone has to do. If everyone isn’t all in, you could end up in a bad situation at a family gathering when you didn’t need to be.”