

Email sent 5th February 2021

Dear Care Home Manager

I am getting in touch with some important information about PCR test samples and the use of lateral flow tests in care homes.

PCR test samples

Two important issues regarding PCR test samples have been identified that I would like to inform you of or remind you about:

- Please could staff ensure that they write the date their sample was taken on the side of the swab container. This may be different from the date on the pre-printed forms from the care home testing hubs (the labs are aware these might differ, and will choose the date on the sample container). It is very important that this date is accurate so that any self-isolation dates are also accurate.
- Care home testing hubs helpfully include tongue depressors within testing kits. Whether it is used or not, please ensure it is removed from the sample bag before you submit the sample. If the tongue depressor is still in the bag when the swab reaches the lab, the swab will automatically be rejected.

Use of lateral flow testing for people with symptoms

We have also become aware of a number of instances in which Lateral Flow Device Tests (LFDs or LFTs) have been used to test social care residents / service users or staff who have symptoms.

Whilst lateral flow testing may have a role in such situations if there is going to be a delay in carrying out PCR testing, it cannot substitute for informing the residents' GP or for performing a PCR test as soon as one is available. In particular, it is essential to bear in mind that lateral flow testing is not as reliable as PCR tests, and that a negative lateral flow test does not reliably rule out the presence of COVID-19.

For these reasons:

- If the person with symptoms is a service user or resident, your first actions should be to isolate the resident, and to notify their GP so that they can make a clinical assessment and arrange a PCR test.
- If the person with symptoms is a staff member, then that person must immediately self-isolate and seek a PCR test.

Under no circumstances should you delay doing these things until after doing a lateral flow test, or decide that they are no longer necessary on the basis of a negative lateral flow test result. If you decide to carry out a lateral flow test whilst you are awaiting the PCR test, you must continue to isolate the individual until the result of the PCR test is known, even if the result of the lateral flow test is negative.

Kind regards

Linda de Caestecker