



## **Douglas Phelan: COVID-19 antibody testing – just don't do it**

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IMAGINE the SARS-CoV-2 virus — the virus that causes COVID-19 — as we often see it pictured these days — little spheres with “spikes” on them. Those spikes are unique, almost like a fingerprint. After someone gets infected, their body develops “antibodies” to this virus. The antibodies attach to those outer spikes of the virus and start the body’s process of eliminating the virus. In very general terms, that’s how antibodies help us get better.

Picture, for a moment, that hundreds of labs were putting out a new test that could tell you that you have antibodies to COVID-19. Now, accept that as reality — it is happening. You might have already heard about it, or been contacted directly by the lab. That presence of antibodies sounds like a fantastic piece of information to have.

But in these rapidly-changing times with regard to COVID-19 and the science surrounding the virus, we need to be critical thinkers. Just because something sounds helpful, does not make it so. We need to ask the right questions, and get answers, as to whether and how a test like this will help us — as individuals, and as a society. So, I want you to keep this test in mind as we ask a few clarifying questions:

**How do we know the test is correct?** It would be very dangerous if people were walking around thinking they were immune to COVID-19, when they really were not. That scenario is the result of a “false positive” test. The opposite is also bad, where a person would think they do not have antibodies, when really they do — a “false negative.” Both of these — but particularly the “false positive” — are big problems for all the antibody tests studied so far. For many different reasons, these tests have not yet shown a good ability to guarantee that its results are correct, and that is a big health risk to these currently-available tests.

**Do COVID-19 antibodies help protect me or those around me?** The short answer is that we are not sure. It is an important distinction to make that “having antibodies” does not equal “immunity.” There are many illnesses where once you get antibodies, you become immune. But there are other illnesses where they do not afford that protection. Having COVID-19 antibodies is not yet known to be protective. COVID-19 antibodies are not, in a manner of speaking, an “immunity passport” or “risk-free certificate.” You would still have to follow the same good hygiene and social distancing efforts that are recommended for everyone.

**Will my insurance cover these COVID-19 antibody tests?** We are not sure of that either. While testing for an acute infection is covered right now under emergency laws and statutes, no policy like that exists for antibody testing. And unfortunately, in the current insurance system, this means you could be on the hook for a large lab bill.

I would be thrilled if I did not feel it necessary to write this opinion. I wish that we had accurate and actionable antibody testing, that made a difference in our lives and patient care, and that we knew much more about COVID-19 than we currently do. We are getting there, but that is not currently the

case. Therefore, it is important that people get testing only if it is accurate and actionable, and that we abstain from doing things in this pandemic that would impart any false sense of security.

At the end of all of these questions, we have to ask ourselves a few more: Should we get a test that looks for antibodies that we are not sure protect anyone? Should we get a test when we cannot guarantee the result is even correct? Should we get a test that won't change our social precautions at all? And, after all of these shortcomings, would we want to be left holding the tab?

At this time, the answer to these questions, unfortunately, is no.

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