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HEALTH & FITNESS

WE TRIED THE LUCIRA COVID-19 AND FLU TEST— HERE'S WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT THE AT-HOME KIT

Rule out COVID and the flu in one fell swoop

Written by Kaleb A. Brown, News Staff Writer who ties events you care about to products you need.
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In the throes of **winter**, you may notice a few sniffles around you. It's customary for this time of year: it's flu season, we've all been gathering and traveling for the holidays—it's the perfect recipe to spread germs, as evidenced by the notable **rise in COVID-19 cases** over the past **several weeks**.

With **so much illness going around** right now, it's hard to know exactly *what* you have if you get sick. From RSV to the common cold, there's a wide range of viruses that are possible. Pfizer's LUCIRA test can conveniently rule out two of them, as it detects both COVID-19 and two types of influenza. It is relatively new to the market, but don't worry —we've tested it ourselves and we're here to give you our thoughts on the testing experience, share expert opinions about its efficacy, and everything else you need to know about the test.

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How does Pfizer's LUCIRA test work?

Credit: Reviewed / Rachel Moskowitz

The contents of the testing kit may look complicated, but it is very simple to use.

LUCIRA works differently from the COVID-19 rapid tests you may have taken before. Many rapid tests use antibodies to detect virus proteins called antigens. If enough virus protein is present, a line on the test strip changes color. LUCIRA detects viral genetic material called RNA using a similar technology to lab-based Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests. PCR creates multiple copies of any viral RNA that's present in the sample. The multiplication process means that PCR-based tests are more sensitive than antigen tests for detecting viruses.

LUCIRA is also able to detect COVID-19, influenza A, and influenza B in a single test. If RNA from any of these viruses is present, the chemical change in the test liquid is detected by the test device and indicated by separate LED lights for each virus. The sensitivity, ability to detect multiple viruses, and clear indicator LEDs give LUCIRA an edge compared to antigen tests.

How accurate is Pfizer's LUCIRA test?

There are two major types of at-home COVID-19 tests: antigen tests and molecular tests. Molecular tests are more accurate than the more common antigen tests, with antigen tests having a higher chance of false negatives, particularly if a **test is taken too early**.

Similar to a PCR test, Lucira is a molecular test. In a **clinical study**, LUCIRA correctly positively diagnosed patients with COVID-19, influenza A, and influenza B 90% of the time. Negative test results were even more accurate, getting it right over 99% of the time for all three viruses.

While these numbers are high, a false negative is still possible, so you shouldn't rely on the LUCIRA test to determine if you have COVID-19 or influenza.

For a second opinion, we spoke to Dr. Marci Drees, Chief Infection Prevention Officer and Hospital Epidemiologist at ChristinaCare, a Delaware-based health system.

Drees warns that while at-home PCR tests are more accurate than antigen tests, nothing is more reliable than lab-based testing from a doctor or hospital. False negatives can lead people to hasty—and inaccurate—conclusions. "There are unlikely to be false positives," says Drees, but "you have to take any negative with a grain of salt and probably repeat testing." She recommends three tests over five days to be sure.

LUCIRA, like other COVID-19 tests, is as accurate for children as it is for adults. That said, administering the test to a fussy child who makes it impossible to get a deep nasal swab can jeopardize the accuracy of the test. The test is expected to be accurate even as COVID-19 continues to mutate, Dr. Drees explains. "That's because proteins [and RNA] tests target don't change that much during mutations."

How does the combo test differ from a standard at-home COVID test?

The most obvious difference between an at-home COVID-19 test and this combo test is that LUCIRA tests for both COVID-19 and two types of influenza.

Taking the test itself doesn't differ much between LUCIRA and more common antigen tests. For both tests, you swab your nostrils, then insert the swab tip into a vial filled with solution. For antigen tests, you'll be instructed to squeeze the vial, close it, attach a dropper, then add a few drops of the solution to a test strip. With LUCIRA, after inserting the swab, you simply close the vial and firmly press it into the test unit.

Test results are displayed via illuminated buttons on the LUCIRA test instead of the lines you may be familiar with in antigen test kits.

How easy is the test to use?

Like other at-home tests, Pfizer's LUCIRA test is very easy to use, with clear instructions that take you through every step of the test. The test is slightly easier to use than antigen tests, as you essentially just let the test run its course after inserting the swab into the vial.

Are the test results clear to read?

Credit: Reviewed / Rachel Moskowitz

You'll have easy-to-read results in just 30 minutes.

Like antigen tests, the LUCIRA instruction booklet teaches you how to interpret the results, but it feels a bit unnecessary because the test results themselves are very intuitive, with one column denoting negative results and the other denoting positive ones. It's also easy to figure out if your test is invalid, as both lights in a row will be lit.

How comfortable is taking the test?

The test is as uncomfortable as an antigen test, as both tests require you to insert a cotton swab into your nose. It's not a pleasant feeling, but it won't be unbearable for most people.

How long does it take to get results?

LUCIRA takes about 30 minutes to display results, which is twice as long as antigen tests. A green light will blink while the test is being processed, and it will stop blinking when the test is complete.

Who should take the LUCIRA test?

One group of people who may benefit greatly from LUCIRA are those who are immunocompromised and at risk of serious illness when contracting viruses. For people who would potentially need life-saving treatment for COVID or influenza soon after showing symptoms, a positive at-home test may help a doctor to prescribe crucial medication fast.

According to Dr. Brees, the test won't be accurate when it comes to asymptomatic individuals, so it's best used when one has developed symptoms.

Given that several symptoms of both flu and COVID-19 overlap, the LUCIRA test's ability to screen for both COVID-19 and influenza is particularly helpful for those who aren't sure what they should be testing for.

Dr. Dave Ellerby, Chief Scientist at Reviewed, had some words regarding the price point. "$50 is pretty steep, but you need to consider what you're getting—more information and the benefits of PCR. Depending on insurance, an office visit plus tests could work out way pricier than $50."

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