

Home testing
Harefield Hospital
Royal Brompton Hospital

How to carry out a cough swab test on a child

This information sheet explains how to carry out a cough swab test on a child. You can also view a video on our Home Testing web page. It is important to follow these instructions to make sure the test is completed correctly.

Contents of the test kit

- Paper form with information details about your child.
- How to carry out a cough swab test leaflet.
- Patient letter asking you to take the test.
- White return envelope labelled UN3373 with a return address label attached and a pre-paid postage sticker.
- Swab stick.
- White absorbent material sheet.
- Plastic transport case for swab.
- Blue and clear plastic bag marked 'Safety bag'.

Before you start

- Allow about 20 minutes to carry out the cough swab test.
- It is important that you post the cough swab back to us on the day you carry out the test. So, make sure you have enough time to go to your local post box before you start the test.

Taking the swab

1. Wash yours and your child's hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after taking the cough swab test.
2. Depending on the age of your child try to do some exercises. The exercises will help loosen any sputum (mucus, phlegm) before you start the cough swab test. For example, perform your child's chest physiotherapy, do some exercise and/or get your child to huff. See What is a huff? on page 4.

3. It is important your child does not touch the cough swab. If you have a young child aged up to 5-years-old, we recommend sitting them on another person's lap. Ask the person to cuddle your child firmly while you carry out the cough swab test. See Picture 1.



Picture 1

4. Older children may be able to carry out their own cough swab test with your guidance. You can give your child a small mirror to help them see what they are doing.

5. You will see a cotton-tipped cough swab stick and a plastic tube inside the test kit. See Picture 2. Undo the white top of the plastic tube and set the top to one side. You will no longer need this white top.



Picture 2

6. Now place the tip of the swab into the back of your child's throat (without touching the walls of the throat). Then ask your child to cough.

7. You can use a tongue depressor (or a clean plastic spoon handle) on a younger child. You need to have practised doing this with us during clinic appointments.

A tongue depressor is a small tool which is used to press down on the tongue. This makes it easier to reach the back of the throat. If you use a tongue depressor you may need to touch the back of your child's throat with the swab gently. This is so they cough.

8. Once you have taken the swab, put the swab stick inside the tube. Press the top of the swab down firmly to make sure it is sealed inside the tube.

9. Wrap the white absorbent material (Picture 3) around the tube. Place the wrapped tube into the transport plastic case, also called a blister pack (Picture 4).



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5

10. Place the transport case with the swab stick inside into the plastic safety bag (picture 5) and seal it.

11. You will find a paper form in your test kit with information details about your child and the test. Write the date and time the cough swab sample was taken clearly on the form.

12. Place this form and the plastic safety bag containing the swab stick into the return envelope (marked UN3373). See pictures 6 and 7. Seal the bag.



Picture 6



Picture 7

13. Dispose of all the other test kit equipment safely in your household bin.

Record your sample

Now submit an online form so we know that your test is on its way to us. You can access the form in 1 of 2 ways:

1. Go to our website www.rbht.nhs.uk. Search for 'Confirmation that your home testing sample has been dispatched'

Fill out the web form that appears on your screen.

2. Or scan the QR code right with your smartphone or tablet to open the web form. Fill out the form and submit it.



Post your sample

Remember to post the sample back to us on the day you carry out the test. The return envelope should have a postage paid sticker and a label with the address of our laboratories stuck to it. Please check the return envelope has both stickers before you post it. The envelope can be posted into your nearest post box.

What is a huff?

A huff is a way of breathing out through the mouth but not coughing. It helps move sputum up your airways so that you can clear it in a controlled way. Usually, children aged 3 to 4 and up can start to learn how to huff.

To huff

- Take a low-medium breath in through your nose.
- Using your abdominal/diaphragm muscles. Squeeze the air out of your lungs and out of your mouth slightly faster until you feel the sputum moving.
- It should feel as if you are trying to mist up a mirror or your glasses using your breath.
- The huff should be long enough to move sputum from the airways.
- You will need to huff several times. Ask a member of your healthcare team if you need advice.

More information

See more information on the Home Testing page on Royal Brompton and Harefield hospitals' website www.rbht.nhs.uk

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about collecting this cough swab, please speak to the staff caring for your child. Or contact our home testing team:

Home Testing team

Royal Brompton Hospital

Phone 020 7352 8121 extension 88401 Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Harefield Hospital

Phone 0330 128 5086, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Was this leaflet useful?

If you have any comments about this information, we'd be happy to hear from you.

email gstt.healthcontent@nhs.net

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please contact the department your appointment is with.

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern about any service or department at Royal Brompton and Harefield hospitals. Contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS):

- Royal Brompton Hospital **phone** 020 7349 7715
 - Harefield Hospital **phone** 01895 826 572
- Or **email** gstt.rbhh-pals@nhs.net

NHS 111

This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day, **phone** 111 **web** www.111.nhs.uk

Become a member of the Trust

Members contribute to Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it's up to you how you get involved. To find out more, **phone** 0800 731 0319 **email** gstt.members@nhs.net or **web** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Resource number: RBHH new

Last reviewed: November 2025

Next review due: November 2028

© 2025 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

A list of sources is available on request

Our values: we are **Caring** | **Ambitious** | **Inclusive**