

1 **The Role of Antibody Testing for SARS-CoV-2: Is There One?**

2 Elitza S. Theel<sup>1</sup>, Patricia Slev<sup>2,3</sup>, Sarah Wheeler<sup>4</sup>, Marc Roger Couturier<sup>2,3</sup>, Susan J. Wong<sup>5</sup>,  
3 Kamran Kadkhoda<sup>6</sup>

4  
5 <sup>1</sup>Division of Clinical Microbiology, Department of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology, Mayo  
6 Clinic, Rochester, MN

7 <sup>2</sup>ARUP Laboratories, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

8 <sup>3</sup>Department of Pathology, University of Utah School of Medicine, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

9 <sup>4</sup> Division of Clinical Immunopathology, Department of Pathology, University of Pittsburgh,  
10 Pittsburgh, PA

11 <sup>5</sup>Wadsworth Center, New York State Department of Health, Albany, NY, USA

12 <sup>6</sup>Immunopathology Laboratory, Robert J. Tomsich Pathology & Laboratory Medicine Institute,  
13 Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH, USA

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20 **Correspondence:**

21 [theel.elitza@mayo.edu](mailto:theel.elitza@mayo.edu)

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24 **Abstract**

25           The emergence of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)  
26 brought with it rapid development of both molecular and serologic assays for identification of  
27 COVID-19 infections. While Food and Drug Administration (FDA) emergency use authorization  
28 (EUA) is required for clinical application of SARS-CoV-2 molecular tests, submission for EUA  
29 is currently a voluntary process for manufacturers of serologic assays. The absence of FDA  
30 oversight of serologic tests is concerning, given that the commercially available serologic assays  
31 are highly variable, differing in their format, the antibody class detected, the targeted antigen and  
32 the acceptable specimen types. An added complication is the lack of a clear understanding for  
33 how such assays should be utilized and what the reported results ultimately indicate, or perhaps  
34 more importantly, what they do not indicate. Here, we provide a brief summary of the  
35 performance of a number of serologic assays reported in the literature, comment on what we do  
36 and do not know regarding our immune response to SARS-CoV-2, and provide a number of  
37 scenarios for which serologic testing will play a role in during our global response to this  
38 pandemic.

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42            Shortly after its emergence in December 2019, the outbreak of severe acute respiratory  
43   syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was declared a pandemic in March 2020 by the World  
44   Health Organization. A beta-coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 is the seventh member of the  
45   *Coronaviridae* family of viruses, and is the causative agent of coronavirus disease 2019  
46   (COVID-19) in humans (1). Given the acute and rapid onset of COVID-19, molecular testing of  
47   respiratory tract sample(s) to detect SARS-CoV-2 RNA remains the preferred diagnostic test for  
48   assessment of symptomatic patients who meet COVID-19 testing criteria as defined by the  
49   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and/or state and local health departments (2).  
50   In addition to molecular testing, there is increasing interest for use of serologic assays to detect  
51   antibodies against SARS-CoV-2. Unlike molecular testing, detection of an immune response to  
52   the virus is an indirect marker of infection. As such, development of robust serologic tests,  
53   alongside guidelines for appropriate utilization and interpretation relative to clinical and  
54   epidemiological needs, is essential to maintain safe patient care standards and support ongoing  
55   public health efforts.

56            Currently, over 91 manufacturers have notified the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)  
57   that they are offering internally validated serologic tests for commercial use, and at the time of  
58   this writing (April 17, 2020), four products have received FDA Emergency Use Authorization  
59   (EUA) (3, 4). Unlike prior public health emergencies, the FDA has indicated that EUA is not  
60   required for distribution or use of commercially available or laboratory developed SARS-CoV-2  
61   serologic tests. Rather, they require that laboratories validate the assays as they deem appropriate  
62   and notify the FDA of their use, alongside inclusion of specific report comments outlining the  
63   limitations of these tests (3). The absence of FDA oversight of serologic tests is concerning given  
64   that the commercially available serologic assays are highly variable, differing in their format

65 (e.g., lateral flow immunoassays [LFAs], enzyme linked immunosorbent assays [ELISAs] and  
66 chemiluminescent immunoassays [CLIA]), the antibody class(es) detected (*i.e.*, IgA, IgM, IgG,  
67 or IgM/IgG total), the SARS-CoV-2 antigen(s) used to design the assay (*e.g.*, recombinant  
68 nucleocapsid protein [NP], subunit 1 of the Spike glycoprotein [S1], the Spike glycoprotein  
69 receptor binding domain [RBD], *etc.*), and the acceptable specimen type (*i.e.*, serum, plasma,  
70 whole blood, finger stick whole blood). Given these differences in assay format and design, as  
71 well as a dearth of peer-reviewed data on performance characteristics, it is critical that  
72 laboratories considering serologic testing for SARS-CoV-2 perform a rigorous verification study  
73 to ensure the analytical performance and clinical accuracy of test results.

74         Such validations must include assessment of specificity using samples collected prior to  
75 or soon after the start of the outbreak from both healthy individuals and those with antibodies to  
76 other common infectious pathogens and from non-infectious disease etiologies. Most concerns  
77 regarding SARS-CoV-2 serologic assay specificity revolve around the potential for cross-  
78 reactivity with antibodies to the commonly circulating alpha- (NL63 and 229E) and beta- (OC43  
79 and HKU1) coronaviruses (CoVs). Prior seroprevalence studies indicate that over 90% of adults  
80 age 50 and older have antibodies to all four common circulating CoVs, therefore the potential for  
81 cross-reactivity in SARS-CoV-2 serologic assays is significant (5). Analysis of the amino acid  
82 sequence homology for both the NP and S1 proteins, common antibody targets in commercially  
83 available serologic tests, shows less than 30% similarity between the respective homologs found  
84 in SARS-CoV-2 and the commonly circulating CoVs (6, 7). Although this in no way rules out  
85 the potential for cross-reactivity, for comparison, SARS-CoV-2 and SARS share over 90%  
86 homology at the amino acid level. Interestingly, recent preliminary studies by multiple groups  
87 have shown limited to no cross-reactivity of antibodies to NL63, 229E, OC42 and HKU1

88 coronaviruses against recombinant forms of SARS-CoV-2 NP and RBD proteins by Western blot  
89 or ELISA analysis (7, 8). However, due to the absence of thorough specificity data, the FDA  
90 currently requires inclusion of a comment indicating that false positive SARS-CoV-2 serologic  
91 test results may occur in patients with antibodies to non-SARS-CoV-2 coronaviruses (3). With  
92 respect to sensitivity studies, given our still emerging understanding of the kinetics of the  
93 immune response and antibody dynamics against SARS-CoV-2, serologic test kits would ideally  
94 be evaluated using serially collected sera from COVID-19 patients previously confirmed by a  
95 molecular assay, or sera collected at a known time post-symptom onset (PSO). The resulting  
96 information would allow laboratorians to provide clinicians preliminary guidance with respect to  
97 timing of seroconversion relative to symptom onset, which due to the variety of serologic assays  
98 available, may be specific to the particular test used in the laboratory.

99 As laboratorians consider the need for SARS-CoV-2 serologic testing, among the first  
100 questions that likely arise are “How well do serologic tests for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies actually  
101 work?” and “How will a SARS-CoV-2 serologic test result really be used in the clinical  
102 practice?” Unfortunately, the answers to some of these questions remain challenging to define,  
103 largely due to the limited peer-reviewed literature on serologic testing currently available.  
104 Generally however, serologic assays are not relied upon for the diagnosis of acute viral  
105 respiratory tract infections – the rapid disease onset, often prior to the development of an  
106 immune response, and the availability of sensitive molecular diagnostics typically obviate  
107 reliance on antibody testing. Recent studies have evaluated the potential role of IgM antibodies  
108 against SARS-CoV-2 as a marker of recent infection. Among those, using an internally  
109 developed ELISA with recombinant SARS-CoV-2 NP antigen, Guo and colleagues recently  
110 showed that IgM antibodies were detectable in 85% of COVID-19 confirmed patients 1 to 7 days

111 PSO (7). Importantly however, they state that molecular testing remains preferred, with higher  
112 sensitivity during the first 5.5 days after illness onset, and conclude that IgM against SARS-  
113 CoV-2 may be useful in suspected COVID-19 patients negative by molecular methods after this  
114 time point. In stark contrast, albeit not yet peer-reviewed, another study evaluating a magnetic  
115 CLIA against the same NP antigen, showed 12% to 40% IgM seroconversion during the same  
116 timeframe post onset (9). Using an ELISA designed to detect IgM antibodies against the RBD of  
117 the S1 subunit of the SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein, data from Zhao *et. al* indicate that only  
118 approximately 28% of patients seroconvert to IgM positive by day 7 PSO, whereas 73% are  
119 positive by day 14 (10). In addition to IgM-based SARS-CoV-2 serologic assays, at least one  
120 immunologic assay to detect IgA-class antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 is also commercially  
121 available. IgA antibodies are the most abundant immunoglobulins in mucosal surfaces, playing  
122 an essential role in protective immunity via toxin and viral neutralizing activities in the  
123 respiratory and gastrointestinal tracts (11, 12). Similar to IgM, recent studies show that IgA  
124 antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 are detectable as early as one day after symptom onset (7). The  
125 specificity of IgA-based assays have not yet been well vetted in the literature however. To date, a  
126 pre-print study concluded that despite higher sensitivity soon after infection, IgA specificity was  
127 lower compared to IgG-based tests, an observation that has been mirrored in unpublished studies  
128 by an author of this commentary (E.S. Theel, P. Slev and S. Wheeler, unpublished data) (6).  
129 Finally, assessment of IgM and IgA antibody responses in patients infected with SARS virus  
130 showed that these two antibody classes did not provide earlier evidence of infection compared to  
131 IgG antibody testing (13). Collectively, the data presented in these initial studies and prior  
132 findings with SARS, suggest that results from SARS-CoV-2 IgM and IgA serologic tests, if

133 used, should be interpreted with significant caution until more robust performance characteristic  
134 and utilization studies are available.

135 In contrast to IgM and IgA class antibodies, detection of IgG antibodies against SARS-  
136 CoV-2 may have a larger role to play during this pandemic. Compared with other antibody  
137 classes, IgG is a longer lasting antibody and similar to IgA, is associated with viral neutralizing  
138 activity, which is likely essential for recovery from COVID-19 (11, 14). Preliminary data suggest  
139 that IgG developed against different SARS-CoV-2 antigens becomes detectable in  
140 immunocompetent patients after at least 8 days PSO, with over 90% of individuals seropositive  
141 after day 14 of illness, although some individuals may take longer to seroconvert depending on  
142 their immune status, or may never seroconvert if significantly immunosuppressed (9, 10).  
143 Although limited in breadth and not all yet peer-reviewed, initial studies suggest fairly high  
144 specificity (>95%) for IgG-based SARS-CoV-2 serologic assays against commonly circulating  
145 coronaviruses and other infectious pathogens (8, 9). Also, according to one reputable ELISA  
146 manufacturer, the false positivity rate observed with their SARS-CoV-2 S1-based IgG ELISA  
147 was 2.5% in sera positive for a diverse range of autoantibodies and 3.4% in sera from influenza  
148 vaccine recipients – such antibodies are not uncommon in the US population. Importantly, true  
149 specificity studies require head-to-head comparison of commercially available serologic assays  
150 with neutralizing antibody tests, which are not widely accessible given the challenges of  
151 performing such assays. Currently, all available IgG serologic assays for SARS-CoV-2 are either  
152 qualitative or semi-quantitative in design. For well-vetted assays, a negative result may indicate  
153 either no prior exposure or, for samples collected too soon after illness onset or from  
154 immunosuppressed patients, the absence of an as of yet detectable immune response. In contrast,  
155 a positive SARS-CoV-2 IgG result implies infection with the virus at some point in the recent or

156 remote past. Importantly, however, the presence of SARS-CoV-2 IgG does not equate to  
157 protective immunity against re-infection nor does it indicate whether a patient has stopped  
158 shedding virus. In theory, seropositive individuals are expected to be at lower risk for re-infection  
159 compared to seronegative persons, however neither the level nor the duration of protective  
160 immunity against COVID-19 is currently known. The potential for at least short term immunity  
161 to COVID-19 is not unfounded however. From prior immunity studies in recovered SARS  
162 patients, we know that neutralizing antibodies were detectable in 89% of patients up to 2 years  
163 after infection, with IgG antibodies becoming undetectable at 6 years (15, 16). Additionally,  
164 although not yet peer-reviewed, preliminary SARS-CoV-2 challenge studies in COVID-19  
165 recovered adult rhesus macaques suggest that primary infection leads to protective immunity for  
166 at least one month post recovery (17). The true temporal duration of protective immunity to  
167 COVID-19, partial or otherwise, will take time to establish.

168         The reference standard method for detection of neutralizing antibodies, which may be  
169 used as a correlate of protective immunity, remains plaque reduction neutralization tests  
170 (PRNTs). These tests are not routinely performed in clinical laboratories however, as they  
171 involve live viral culture, which for SARS-CoV-2 requires biosafety level 3 (BSL3) containment  
172 facilities, are laborious, dependent on a high level of expertise and are not amenable to  
173 automation. Although alternative BSL2 protocols using pseudotyped Vesicular Stomatitis Virus  
174 (VSV) expressing different SARS-CoV-2 surface antigens are being developed to obviate the  
175 need for culture of live SARS-CoV-2, these methods remain in the research arena (18).  
176 Importantly, regardless of which neutralizing antibody test is being performed, it remains unclear  
177 what minimal neutralizing antibody titer correlates with protective immunity and whether results  
178 from the commercially available SARS-CoV-2 serologic assays can predict such immunity.



179 Despite these significant unknowns, there remains interest and even demand to perform serologic  
180 tests at a national scale, with the potential to make consequential decisions based on the reported  
181 results.

182 The following are scenarios for which SARS-CoV-2 serologic testing, specifically IgG-  
183 based assays, may be useful given our current knowledge of the virus, our limited understanding  
184 of the immune response to it, and the urgent need for improved antiviral therapies and preventive  
185 measures.

186 **Screening of Recovered COVID-19 Patients for Convalescent Plasma Therapy.** Currently,  
187 among the most advocated patient-centered use of SARS-CoV-2 serologic testing is for  
188 screening of COVID-19 recovered patients for the presence of anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies. If  
189 present, COVID-19 convalescent plasma (CCP) collected from these donors may be used to treat  
190 acutely ill patients with COVID-19 (19). Clinical trials are currently on-going across the nation  
191 to evaluate the efficacy of convalescent plasma therapy in both sick patients and as potential  
192 post-exposure prophylaxis of health care workers (HCWs; [www.ccpp19.org](http://www.ccpp19.org)). Notably, the FDA  
193 investigational drug use (IND) requirements for these clinical trials, or for emergency IND use,  
194 indicate that donor convalescent plasma should have a neutralizing antibody titer of at least  
195 1:160, although a titer of 1:80 is acceptable in the absence of other plasma  
196 ([https://www.fda.gov/vaccines-blood-biologics/investigational-new-drug-ind-or-device-](https://www.fda.gov/vaccines-blood-biologics/investigational-new-drug-ind-or-device-exemption-ide-process-cber/recommendations-investigational-covid-19-convalescent-plasma)  
197 [exemption-ide-process-cber/recommendations-investigational-covid-19-convalescent-plasma](https://www.fda.gov/vaccines-blood-biologics/investigational-new-drug-ind-or-device-exemption-ide-process-cber/recommendations-investigational-covid-19-convalescent-plasma);  
198 accessed 4/11/2020). Unfortunately, neutralizing antibody tests are not widely available and  
199 results from commercially available serologic assays are not known to correlate to neutralizing  
200 antibody titers. Given the urgent need of convalescent plasma as potential bridging therapy until  
201 more targeted treatments or preventative measures are available, validated SARS-CoV-2 IgG

202 serologic assays may be used to rapidly screen potential donors for the presence or absence of  
203 antibodies, with the goal of subsequently testing positive samples by neutralization assays.  
204 Studies are also ongoing to determine whether the semi-quantitative results from a number of  
205 SARS-CoV-2 IgG ELISAs show any correlation to neutralizing antibody levels. Notably, a  
206 recent study on this topic showed poor correlation between a spike protein-based IgG serological  
207 test and PRNT, suggesting that such a correlative approach between currently available  
208 commercial assays and neutralizing antibody titers may not be possible (6, 20).

209 **SARS-CoV-2 Seroprevalence Studies.** Serologic testing to detect IgG-class antibodies against  
210 SARS-CoV-2 will play an essential role in determining the true prevalence of this virus. This is  
211 particularly true if one considers the constant discussions around positive and negative predictive  
212 values of molecular tests for SARS-CoV-2. A prevalence of total disease in the community  
213 needs to be established in order to perform such calculations with any meaning. Given that the  
214 rate of asymptomatic infection with SARS-CoV-2 continues to be refined, with previously  
215 reported rates ranging from 4% to 80% across different populations and exposure scenarios, such  
216 seroprevalence studies will allow us to establish a more accurate regional or national  
217 denominator for the number of infected individuals, which will ultimately help to determine a  
218 true case fatality rate. (21-23) ([https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-similarities-and-](https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-similarities-and-differences-covid-19-and-influenza)  
219 [differences-covid-19-and-influenza](https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-similarities-and-differences-covid-19-and-influenza); accessed 4/12/2020). Importantly however, the serologic  
220 assay(s) utilized for such seroprevalence studies must exhibit exceptionally high specificity ( $\geq$   
221 97%) given that the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the United States is likely still fairly  
222 low and the potential impact of cross-reactive antibodies to other circulating CoVs – a test with  
223 lower specificity could create significant bias and high rates of false positive results in large  
224 scale sero-surveys. Carefully-designed serial seroprevalence studies, performed over time and

225 including large cohorts will also provide us with a better understanding of transmission patterns  
226 and may help determine when (or if) we reach a state of herd immunity. Herd (population)  
227 immunity, occurs when a sufficient proportion of the population becomes immune to the  
228 infectious agent, thus limiting the chance for further infections to occur. The percentage of  
229 individuals that must be immune for this to occur depends on multiple factors, including the  
230 infectiousness or transmissibility of the infectious agent – the more transmissible the agent, the  
231 higher percentage of the population that needs to be immune for herd immunity to be effective.  
232 The precise threshold for what percentage of the population would need to be immune to SARS-  
233 CoV-2 for this to occur is currently undefined, however assuming that the SARS-CoV-2 basic  
234 reproductive number ( $R_0$ ) ranges from 2 to 3.5, this threshold may range from 40% to 75% (24).  
235 It is paramount to note however, that given the early and intense social distancing measures  
236 instituted by federal and local governments, viral transmission has likely significantly decreased,  
237 to the point that the actual herd immunity may not be achieved until such public health measures  
238 are lifted. Once available, a safe and efficacious vaccine should be able to induce widespread,  
239 population-level immunity.

240 **Monitoring Immune Responses to Candidate COVID-19 Vaccine Candidates.** The most  
241 recent reports indicate that there are over 100 SARS-CoV-2 vaccine candidates either in  
242 development, in initial preclinical stages, or which have entered human clinical trials (25). At  
243 least five of these are currently in Phase 1 clinical trials and vary in their design, ranging from  
244 the use of lipid nanoparticles expressing the SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein to modified  
245 dendritic cells expressing synthetic mini-genes from selected viral proteins. Serologic testing for  
246 SARS-CoV-2 will play an important role for pre-screening individuals prior to admission into  
247 vaccine clinical trials, and to monitor the temporal immune responses in vaccine recipients and

248 ultimately help to define vaccine efficacy. It is important to note that serological assays able to  
249 detect a neutralizing antibody response, (*i.e.*, PRNT) will be critical to provide the most accurate  
250 results for vaccine immunogenicity trials. Notably, whether such antibodies would potentially  
251 mediate antibody-dependent enhancement leading to adverse events is an important question that  
252 will be addressed through efficacy trials and post-vaccine surveillance.

### 253 **Summary**

254 As a result of the novelty of SARS-CoV-2 and the limited data currently available  
255 regarding our immune response to it, well vetted utilization strategies for SARS-CoV-2 serologic  
256 assays are lacking. Use of anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibody tests performed at a population-level to  
257 guide return-to-work decisions or to ‘re-start the economy’ is a topic of widespread discussion at  
258 the local, state and national levels. Undeniably, this is an intriguing concept, with mass serologic  
259 screening potentially achievable at a national scale. However, we must remain cognizant of the  
260 current challenges and limitations of such an approach. First, there remains significant concern  
261 among laboratorians with respect to the over 91 serologic tests that are currently commercially  
262 available, for which the performance characteristics are not yet known. In fact, reports of poorly  
263 performing serologic tests are already emerging in the media  
264 (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/05/health/coronavirus-infection-tests/index.html>; accessed April  
265 12, 2020). Should mass screening be recommended at the state or national level, it is imperative  
266 that data-based guidance regarding serologic test accuracy is available to laboratories  
267 considering such testing. Second, as outlined above, although a positive SARS-CoV-2 IgG result  
268 suggests prior infection with the virus, it does not independently imply protective immunity.  
269 Similarly, the duration of such immunity remains unknown. Finally, depending on the timing of  
270 SARS-CoV-2 infection and sampling for serologic testing, recently infected individuals may be

271 IgG positive, yet still be shedding virus as determined by molecular assays. Whether the detected  
272 viral RNA in these individuals equates to transmissible virus cannot be resolved without viral  
273 culture of the specimen at BSL-3 containment – a method not available in clinical laboratories.  
274 Notably, a recent small study in hospitalized patients showed that infectious virus was not  
275 detectable in culture from seroconverted patients 8 days after of symptom onset, whereas  
276 molecular testing of nasopharyngeal swab specimens remained positive beyond 14 days for most  
277 patients, suggesting that detected RNA by these assays represents residual RNA from non-  
278 infectious virus (20). This study however, was conducted using mildly symptomatic individuals.  
279 Given that severely-ill individuals remain SARS-CoV-2 RNA positive for several weeks despite  
280 the appearance of neutralizing antibodies, further studies using viral culture are necessary to  
281 better determine the period of transmissibility (26).

282 In conclusion, the availability of serologic assays to detect antibodies against SARS-  
283 CoV-2 presents us with additional tools to use from our SARS-CoV-2 pandemic response  
284 toolbox. As we learn more about our immune response to SARS-CoV-2, its level and duration of  
285 protective immunity, and as we gain a better understanding of the advantages and limitations of  
286 commercially available serologic assays, more defined, patient-centered utilization guidelines  
287 will likely emerge. These tests may be useful from a public health, risk management, and  
288 academic perspective, but additional data is required to fully drive this response.

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