

COVID rapid test makers struggling to meet demand

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(HealthDay)—Shortages of both supplies and workers are wreaking

havoc on the efforts of COVID at-home test makers to deliver enough of the tests to Americans, even as the federal government [pledges](#) to provide 500 million free, at-home kits.

Like many other businesses, test kit manufacturers "have too many of their staff out with COVID. Thus, even if they have the physical capacity for production, they don't have the staff," Mara Aspinall, from Arizona State University, and colleagues wrote in a newsletter, *NBC News* reported.

She estimated that the current total monthly capacity of U.S. rapid at-home test kit manufacturing is 260 million units per month, which is expected to rise to 355 million by February and 526 million by March.

The government's order for the free test kits is in addition to existing supply and doesn't interfere with existing orders, said a senior White House official, who added that four new rapid tests with high-volume production capacity have been authorized since September, *NBC News* reported.

On Jan. 13, the Department of Defense [announced](#) the awarding of contracts to three companies, Abbott, Roche Diagnostics and iHealth labs, for 380 million test kits, in an "effort that supports the president's plan to deliver 500 million free at-home COVID-19 tests."

Abbott has plans to "build two new U.S. manufacturing facilities, hired thousands of people for new jobs that pay American wages, and we continue to invest in automation to allow us to scale further," Kim Modory, Abbott's senior director of public affairs for diagnostics, told *NBC News*.

Abbott is currently producing 70 million tests a month. It is building up the ability to manufacture an additional 30 million to be added to

support government, school and more retail efforts, Modory added.

Meanwhile, Roche spokeswoman Michelle Johnson said the company will start deliveries in January and by March provide "tens of millions" of test kits. The company has invested \$500 million globally to boost instrument and test machine capacity. Still, "like other companies, we've experienced our share of supply challenges," she said.

One of those other companies includes San Diego-based Quidel, which currently produces more than 40 million tests a month and plans to increase that to 70 million by February. Unfortunately, 10% of its workforce is currently quarantined.

"With [Omicron](#), it's gone crazy. The demand far exceeds what we're doing," Quidel CEO Douglas Bryant told *NBC News*. "The biggest challenge is actually enough people to do the work."

Bryant said the company has found it difficult to reach its target of hiring 400 workers for a new production facility and finding enough trucks to make deliveries, *NBC News* reported.

Supplies are also an issue: Demand for high-quality nitrocellulose membrane, the off-white fabric that forms the COVID test strip, has soared during the pandemic.

Some manufacturers cited difficulties sourcing sufficient nitrocellulose supplies as an obstacle to production earlier this year, a senior administration official told *NBC News*.

"We acted to alleviate" the bottleneck, the official said.

In a statement, Rachel Bloom-Baglin, a spokesperson for MilliporeSigma, a supplier of nitrocellulose to major U.S. rapid [test](#) kit

makers, told *NBC News* that "raw material availability to make nitrocellulose membrane is readily available, but the world does not have enough membrane manufacturing capacity to turn the raw materials into finished goods, which are then used by our customers to manufacture rapid antigen tests."

The company makes the product at a facility in Cork, Ireland. Although the [company](#) completed an expansion of the plant that doubled its capacity, even that did not meet the soaring demand.

On Dec. 29, the Department of Defense awarded a \$136.7 million contract to MilliporeSigma for the construction of a new facility in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, over a three-year timespan, *NBC News* reported.

More information: Visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for more on [COVID tests](#).

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