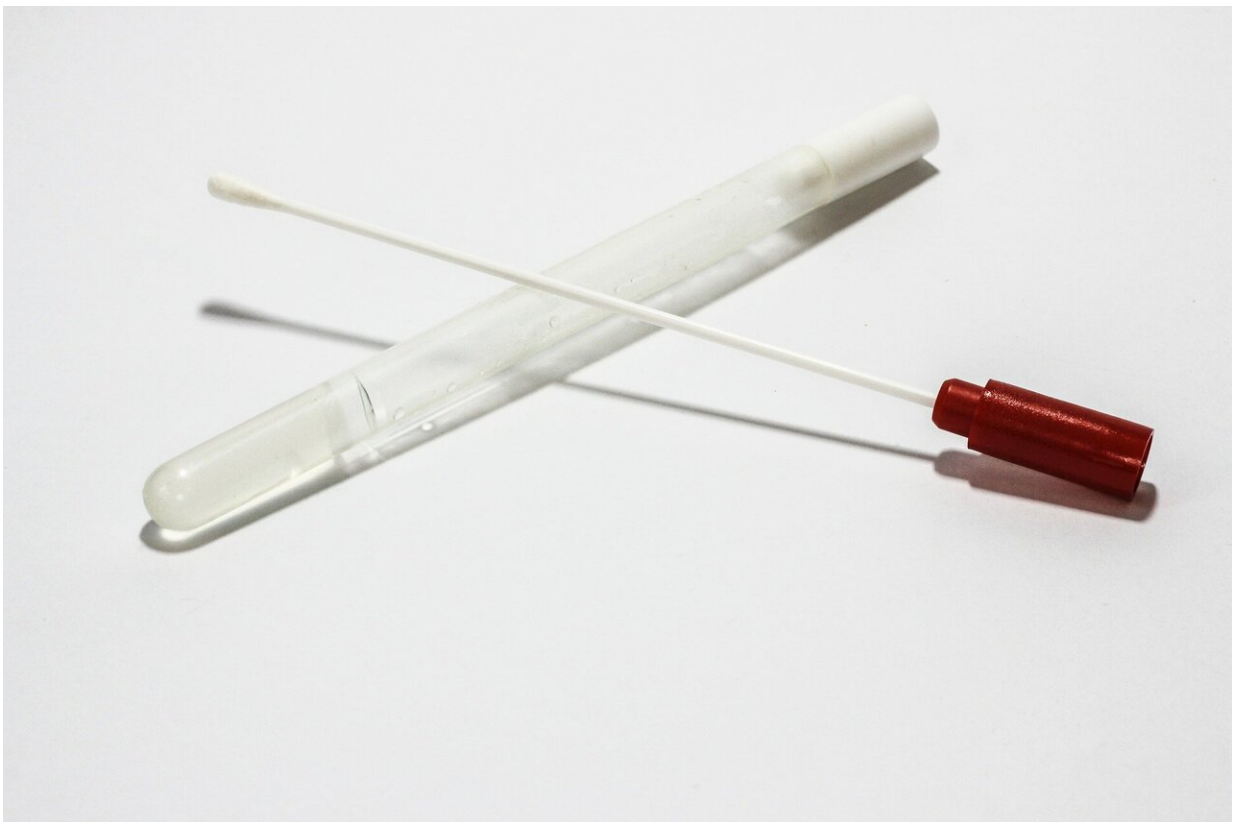# Fraudulent 'pop-up' COVID testing centers are rampant. Here are 8 tips to help protect against phony clinics

January 21 2022, by Angie Leventis Lourgos



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Tricia Poreda recently walked inside a COVID-19 testing center on Chicago's Northwest Side and was immediately appalled by the facility's

lack of basic health and safety protocols.

Employees collecting specimens weren't changing gloves or washing hands in between patients, she recalled. The site didn't seem to be enforcing social distancing and the employees performing tests weren't wearing proper personal protection equipment.

"I would say if you didn't have (COVID) when you walked in, there's a good chance you had it when you walked out, with those kinds of practices," said Poreda, an ICU nurse, who left that center and found another location to get tested for the virus. "Some of those places are superspreader sites on their own."

With COVID-19 testing in high demand in the Chicago area, medical experts and government officials are warning consumers to be extremely wary of substandard or fraudulent "pop-up" testing centers. Some of them have been found operating in sketchy settings while others have reportedly given patients fake results—or failed to return any results at all.

One Illinois-based chain of coronavirus testing sites, the Center for COVID Control, has temporarily shut down amid multiple investigations by federal authorities and various state agencies.

The Minnesota attorney general's office announced Wednesday that it has filed a lawsuit against the company and its Illinois-based lab, Doctors Clinical Laboratory Inc., alleging they collected patient samples but "either failed to deliver test results, or delivered test results that were falsified or inaccurate," according to the agency's news release.

The companies did not immediately return Tribune requests for comment; a written statement on the Center for COVID Control website said the business was going to "pause operations," citing high demand

and stressed staffing.

"Certain Center for Covid Control (CCC) locations are experiencing high demand for testing due to the omicron variant surge," the Jan. 13 statement said. "This unusually high patient demand has stressed staffing resources, as has been widely reported, in a subset of our locations, affecting our usual customer service standards and diagnostic goals."

A northwest suburban man was ticketed twice this month for conducting unlawful coronavirus testing out of a car in the parking lot of a former Bakers Square restaurant in Niles, and without a business license, according to village officials.

And social media sites are rife with stories about shady fly-by-night COVID testing centers. One woman posted on the Facebook site Chicago Vaccine Hunters that she had recently received a negative test result from a testing center in the western suburbs.

"This would be good news except that I haven't been in to test yet!" she wrote on the site.

Illinois Department of Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike earlier this month advised residents to be wary of potentially fraudulent testing centers.

"We do want to urge some caution with some of these clinics," she said. "There unfortunately are those who are taking advantage of these crazy times to try and scam people. So if you have any doubts about the testing location that you are looking at, go ahead and ask some questions. What lab is the testing site using? When will you receive the results, and from whom?"

Here are eight tips to help discern which testing centers are

legitimate—and protect yourself against all different types of COVID-19 testing scams.

1. Start with state-sponsored testing sites, when possible. Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul recently issued a warning about unregulated testing centers, urging residents to first try government test sites or those recommended by their health care providers. Testing locations can be found at the Illinois Department of Public Health website, the Cook County Department of Health website and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website.

2. Ask questions about the medical director, the type of test performed and the lab used for results. Infectious disease expert Dr. Robert Murphy suggested asking for the name of the site's medical director and their credentials.

"A quick Google search should be informative," said Murphy, executive director of Northwestern University's Institute for Global Health and a professor of infectious diseases at the Feinberg School of Medicine. "If they will not provide you with a legitimate name with credentials, don't go there."

Ask for the name of the exact test that's being done and if the test has been cleared by the Food and Drug Administration. Consumers can ask for the name of the laboratory that will be processing the test, officials said, and then search if the lab is appropriately certified.

3. Get a phone number. Ask when the results will be available and how they'll be communicated to you, the attorney general's office said. Ask for a phone number and who you can call with any questions or concerns about test results.

4. Being asked to pay for the test out-of-pocket is a red flag. The

attorney general's office added that consumers should be cautious if a site requests cash or credit card payments for a test. Most testing locations "will instead bill insurance companies, or, if individuals are uninsured, seek reimbursement from a federal fund," according to the attorney general's website.

5. Go somewhere else if the location says it won't accept insurance. "If the site does not accept insurance, this is another red flag as insurers are now required to accept requests for COVID tests," Murphy added. "If they will not accept your insurance, which includes Medicaid and Medicare, go someplace else."

6. Check health and safety standards. "I would make sure the site has good infection control processes," said Dr. Elizabeth Davis, medical director of community health equity at Rush University Medical Center. "The site should be clean. People should be hand sanitizing and changing gloves between every patient. They should be wearing medical masks."

When getting a rapid test, Davis advised asking for the brand name as well as the expiration date, to make sure it hasn't expired.

"There should be social distancing on-site and a mechanism to limit flow," she added.

7. Check at-home COVID-19 tests before purchase. The attorney general's office is also cautioning consumers about potential fake at-home test kits offered for sale; the FDA has a list of authorized at-home test kits. The FDA also keeps a list of fraudulent COVID-19 treatments and prevention products, which includes the names of some COVID tests.

Expect to pay between $14 and $25 for packs of at-home rapid test kits. Report fraudulent tests or price gouging to the state attorney general's

office.

8. Beware of phony websites when signing up for free government-issued COVID tests. With the Biden administration offering American households free COVID-19 tests requested via the U.S. Postal Service, the Better Business Bureau is warning consumers to be on guard for fraudulent, look-alike websites.

Scammers often take advantage of these kinds of government initiatives, creating phony sites to get access to financial or other sensitive information, according to the BBB.

"You follow the link to a website that looks official at first glance," the BBB says on its website. "It may have the United States Postal Service (USPS) logo, just like the real website. It also has a form to request your tests. But when you start filling out the form, you notice something unusual. This fake version may ask you for personal information, such as your Social Security number or Medicare ID. It could also request your credit card details, under the guise of needing to pay for shipping."

The BBB advises consumers to examine the domain name: The federal government's website is special.usps.com/testkits, but phony ones might swap a few letters or include spelling mistakes. The BBB also notes that the real website only asks for a name and address; it doesn't request Social Security numbers, insurance information or any other sensitive data.

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