

Covid-19 testing: Not as uncomfortable as you think

Most people would think twice about having something inserted into their nose or throat, which could explain why some say no to being swabbed for Covid-19 tests if given a choice. Timothy Goh - who has a strong dislike for such procedures - finds out first-hand what swabbing procedures feel like.

TEST 1

Nasopharyngeal swab (conducted by SwabBot)
A rotating swab is inserted through the nostril to the back of the nasal cavity by a specially designed robot.

This was the test I was most nervous about, as it was done by a robot. Leaning close to the machine in a seated position, I braced myself for a burst of pain. Instead, the feeling was similar to when water got into my nose while swimming. It smarted a little, but the machine was incredibly gentle - and the process was over in a few seconds.

It was not completely painless, but it certainly was not as painful as other experiences such as biting my lip or getting pinched, and definitely not enough to make me tear up.

Discomfort level: 3/10



TEST 2

Nasopharyngeal swab (conducted by a healthcare professional)
This is considered the current gold standard for tests due to its ability to detect the virus.

Some patients reflexively flinch or pull their heads away from the swabber when the swab enters their nose.

In my case, I did not feel the swab until it hit the back of my nasal cavity, which was when I experienced the now-familiar sense of getting water up my nose. It was slightly more painful, and I felt my eyes sting but did not tear up.

Again, the process was over in a couple of seconds. This test was not as painful as some people had described, and felt far better than an injection.

Discomfort level: 4/10



TEST 3

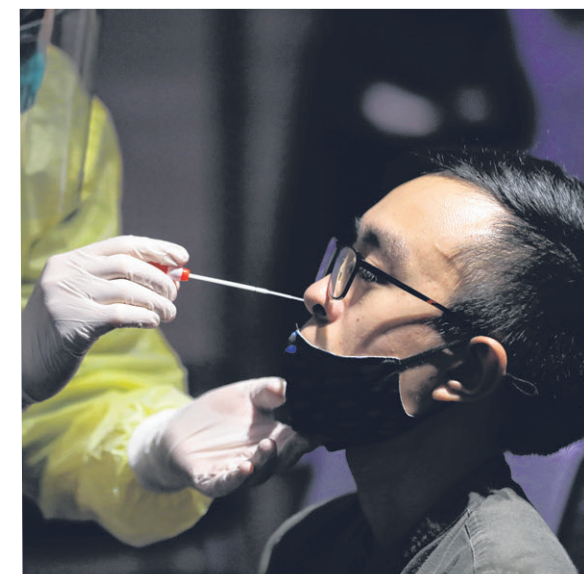
Nasal swab
A swab is inserted partially up the nose by a healthcare professional and rotated.

Nasal swabs differ from nasopharyngeal swabs as the swab is inserted only partially up the nose.

This makes it almost completely painless. The sensation felt like digging my nose and going a little too far.

Such swabs need to be paired with other tests to be effective, such as the oropharyngeal swab at the back of the throat. Some swabbers may prefer to use a combination of the oropharyngeal swab and the nasal swab instead of a nasopharyngeal swab.

Discomfort level: 1/10



TEST 4

Oropharyngeal swab
A swab is inserted to the back of the throat through the mouth till it is touching the tonsils, and moved around to collect samples. It is often paired with the nasal swab.

Despite no pain at all, I gagged instinctively when the swab touched the back of my throat. This made it rather uncomfortable, and it took another two tries before I could suppress my reflex and the doctor could properly swab me. Patients who do not have as strong a gag reflex may find this test less unpleasant than those involving the nose.

Discomfort level: 5/10



CONCLUSION

I had gone into the tests a sceptic, suspecting that the authorities might have been downplaying the discomfort to avoid scaring people away.

But none of them was as painful as I'd imagined them to be, and they were not as uncomfortable for me as other medical experiences such as drawing blood or getting a scope.

The tests are no walk in the park, and I certainly would not keep taking them over and over again for fun.

But given that swabbing is free for those who are assessed as needing it, and they can grant peace of mind and help protect others, I would say they are something that should be appreciated and undertaken rather than avoided.