

This test says it can detect the omicron variant – and it can be used for travel

(Courtesy of Victoria M. Walker, The Points Guy)

Travelers these days have plenty of [COVID-19 testing options](#), but getting a test for travel now is more important than ever. Between the United States [shortening the testing window](#) to fly into the country from abroad to documented testing shortages to the holidays fast approaching, having more options is always a good thing.

But one company is carving out room in the COVID-19 testing world – and it’s making a bold claim that it can discover the new [omicron](#) variant. Here’s what you need to know about Cue Health, the latest player in the COVID-19 testing space.

What you need to know about Cue Health

[Cue Health](#) is a direct-to-consumer service that claims to offer 97.8% accurate results – in just 20 minutes. It’s authorized by the FDA for at-home use and can be used for travel purposes. The CDC earlier this year [expanded the testing program](#) for international travel to the U.S., allowing airlines to accept at-home instant tests that include remote supervision.

The company also claims that it can detect the [omicron coronavirus variant](#).

The variant, discovered in November, may be more contagious than others and contains several spike protein mutations that may make it less responsive to [COVID-19 vaccines](#), so travelers planning to see family members or hop on a plane this holiday season might want to go with this option for the peace of mind. The company says that 99.2% of the published omicron sequences – what scientists use to identify coronavirus mutations – were a “perfect match” to the primers used in Cue’s COVID-19 test.

“Our molecular test is backed by the science and technology necessary to detect emerging variants, including omicron, enabling individuals and healthcare practitioners to make better-informed decisions,” Ayub Khattak, Cue’s CEO, said in a [statement](#).

How much does it cost?

Cue Health offers two options for travelers: the Cue+ Essential membership, which starts at \$49.99 (a more expensive option costs \$89.99 per month,) or a one-time purchase with a pack of three or 10 tests starting at \$225.

The Cue+ Complete membership offers 24-hour in-app access to doctors, a 10- or 20-pack of COVID-19 tests suitable for travel purposes, a discounted “Cue Reader,” a 20% discount off additional COVID-19 tests and certified test results that you can use for travel. Most importantly, \$89.99 membership also offers proctored testing (which the CDC requires) to meet travel entry requirements to fly into the United States.

The \$225 option may undoubtedly raise some eyebrows, given how [affordable at-home testing has gotten](#). It includes a Cue Health Monitoring System, a three-pack or 10-pack (the 10-pack option is a whopping \$713) and 5% off a 10-pack of tests. Another [option](#), which includes a “Cue Reader” — a

portable device that automatically processes test results — costs \$474. The company says its tests have a nine-month shelf life.

Which option should you get?

The \$49 or \$89 option really is a no-brainer compared to the more expensive a-la-carte options, which don't even include access to doctors or test results that can be used for travel. Even with the discounted Cue Reader (a \$149 fee), it's a much better choice than the more expensive option. If you're getting COVID-19 tests solely for health reasons, the a la carte option could be a decent choice, but there are other options, like Binax's non-proctored test packs, which are [significantly cheaper](#).

How is this different from other at-home COVID-19 tests?

Many COVID-19 at-home testing providers provide quick turnaround times, primarily to meet the demand of busy travelers needing a last-minute test before heading on vacation or seeing family. As these tests are primarily used for travelers flying back to the U.S., having access to a test proctor and digital results isn't that uncommon — but is still a solid feature.

What's interesting – and unique – about this service is the membership option, which other services like Abbott and Ellume don't provide. If you're a frequent traveler, it may be more beneficial to take advantage of the \$49 membership fee over the more expensive a-la-carte option.

What other at-home COVID-19 testing options are out there?

As I've written before, several companies [sell at-home or mail-in COVID-19 tests](#). However, only proctored (supervised) tests approved by the CDC can be used to fly into the U.S. So, make sure you're picking up a proctored test before hitting the road if you don't want to run into an unwelcome surprise during your trip.

Several at-home testing options vary in price, turnaround time and availability. Here are some other testing options:

- [Abbott BinaxNow COVID-19 Home Test](#): Two versions, one [approved for travel](#) and one that isn't. Cost: Starts at \$50 for the CDC-approved test, depending on the distributor.
- [Ellume COVID-19 Home Test](#) The CDC approves this test for travel purposes. However, it's not currently available online. Instead, you must find one in a local store and then pay separately for a virtual consultation. Note that some of these kits were [recalled by the FDA](#), so check the box and make sure the kit you're buying isn't an affected one.

Bottom line

More COVID-19 testing options is always a good thing – and if Cue's claims that it can detect the omicron variant are valid – it will definitely be a game-changer as travelers navigate the new variant during the holiday season and New Year. If travel is your purpose, I'd suggest going with the Cue+ membership (or the slightly more expensive Cue+ Complete) solely for peace of mind.