Alaska Public Health Alert

Updated Procedures for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Testing in Alaska

April 8, 2020

Summary
The purpose of this alert is to update Alaska health care providers about new procedures and strategies for managing COVID-19 surveillance and testing in Alaska.

Key Points
- Providers must fill out a COVID-19 Report Form for each patient, regardless of the testing lab; this also includes new point of care testing machines. Results from these assays should still be routed to SOE.
- Health care providers do not need to call the Alaska Section of Epidemiology (SOE) to approve testing.
- Call SOE at 907-269-8000 or 800-478-0084 (after-hours) regarding outpatients who will not be able to isolate in their own homes (e.g., homeless persons or out-of-town travelers).
- Testing supplies are still running low nationwide. Until this shortage is addressed, health care providers should prioritize testing to specific groups as per the updated table below.
- The Alaska State Public Health Laboratory (ASPHL) is running specimens 7 days a week.
  - STAT testing is generally not being offered.
- CDC guidance for discontinuation of home isolation for persons with COVID-19, available here. Anyone being tested for COVID-19 should be informed to act as if they have COVID-19 until a result comes back.
- SOE guidance on what outpatients should do if they have COVID-19 is available here.

Guidance for Testing at ASPHL
Many patients with COVID-19 present with very mild illness. As such, we advise setting a lower threshold for testing—especially for staff and residents in healthcare settings and congregate care/living facilities. Consider testing persons who meet the following characteristics:

- New onset of any one of the following: cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing, OR
- New onset of two or more of the following: chills, diminished sense of taste or smell, diarrhea, fatigue, fever (measured or subjective), headache, muscle/joint aches, nausea, rigors, runny nose, sore throat, or sputum production.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient Criteria</th>
<th>Send Specimens to</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Hospitalized</td>
<td>ASPHL*</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Patients, residents, and staff in any setting where healthcare services are</td>
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<td>delivered (e.g., hospital, department of corrections, mental/behavioral health</td>
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<td>clinics, long-term care facilities, assisted living facilities)</td>
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<td>• Persons and staff in other institutional or congregate settings (e.g.,</td>
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<td>corrections, juvenile detention centers, homeless shelters)</td>
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<td>• First responder (e.g., police, fire, paramedic)</td>
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<td>• Household member of a health care provider</td>
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<td>• Known close contact to a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the past 14 days</td>
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<td>• An outpatient who is at increased risk for serious illness (i.e., age ≥60 years</td>
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<td>or has one or more select chronic medical conditions, such as heart disease,</td>
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<td>lung disease, diabetes, or immunocompromised)</td>
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<td>• Out-of-state travel in the past 14 days</td>
<td>Other Laboratory (e.g., Commercial)</td>
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<td>• Persons working in critical infrastructure occupations (e.g., grocery stores,</td>
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<td>pharmacies, restaurants, gas stations, public utilities, etc.)</td>
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<td>• Any other patient as determined by clinical discretion</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Asymptomatic persons</td>
<td>DO NOT TEST</td>
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*Alaska State Public Health Laboratory supplies are limited, so please follow the preferred laboratory guidance closely.
Guidance for Facilities with Their Own COVID-19 Laboratory Testing Capacity

- Facilities with their own molecular diagnostic testing capacity for COVID-19 should develop criteria for testing prioritization based on the above table and local community needs.
- Report all test results (positive and negative) to the Section of Epidemiology (SOE).
  - Methods for reporting include integration into existing electronic laboratory reporting (ELR) data feeds or fax (907-563-7868). Please email Megan Tompkins (megan.tompkins@alaska.gov) to inform us about how your facility will report.
  - Please immediately notify SOE by fax with positive test results (in addition to ELR reports).
- Mail all positive specimens to the Alaska State Virology Laboratory for whole genome sequencing, per the shipping instructions available here.

Specimen Type and Priority (based on CDC Guidance)

- A nasopharyngeal (NP) specimen is the preferred choice for swab-based SARS-CoV-2 testing.
- When collection of a NP swab is not possible, the following are acceptable alternatives:
  - A nasal mid-turbinate swab collected by a healthcare professional or by onsite self-collection (using a flocked tapered swab).
  - An anterior nares specimen collected by a healthcare professional or by onsite self-collection (using a flocked or spun polyester swab). A single polyester swab with a plastic shaft should be used to sample both nares.
  - An oropharyngeal (OP) specimen collected by a healthcare professional.
- Do not use cotton or calcium alginate swabs, or swabs with a wood or metal shaft (exception: an aluminum shaft is okay) for specimen collection.
- All swabs should be placed in a transport tube containing either viral/universal transport medium, Amies transport medium, or sterile RNase-free saline.
- A self-collection guidance video is available here.
- Test lower respiratory tract specimens, if available.
  - For patients who develop a productive cough, sputum should be collected and tested for SARS-CoV-2. The induction of sputum is not recommended.
  - When it is clinically indicated (e.g., those receiving invasive mechanical ventilation), a lower respiratory tract aspirate or bronchoalveolar lavage sample should be collected and tested as a lower respiratory tract specimen.
- Maintain proper infection control when collecting specimens. See Biosafety FAQs for handling and processing specimens from suspected case patients.

Additional Specimen Collection Information

- ASPHL: details on page 23 of the Laboratory Test Directory; instructions for obtaining a NP swab on page 95. Specimens are batched current turnaround time is 1–3 days.
- Consult individual commercial labs for specific instructions.
- FDA guidance on specimen transport media and swabs is available here.

New Case Definition for COVID-19

The Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologist (CSTE) recently released interim criteria for defining COVID-19 cases. This includes clinical and laboratory criteria used to define confirmed cases; as well as epidemiologic criteria that can be used to tabulate probable cases who have epidemiologic links to laboratory confirmed cases but themselves have not been tested. Given the current epidemiology of COVID-19 in Alaska, we continue to recommend testing close contacts; however, we will likely tabulate them as probable cases if/when community transmission becomes more widespread and reduce testing for those persons accordingly.

Please check the DHSS COVID-19 website and CDC’s COVID-19 website frequently for updates.