

Transcription

Production Conversations COVID 19
Episode Two / Testing
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Welcome back to Conversations COVID-19, and in this episode we're looking at the big issue of testing. There's so much discussion around this issue. How important is it? What's the availability? And of course, who should be tested? Well here to answer some of these questions are Dr Howard Leibrand, Medical Officer for Skagit County, and Jennifer Johnson, Director of Public Health for Skagit County.

Firstly, Dr Howard, why is testing such a big issue?

Dr Leibrand

Well I think the challenges started several months ago when we had trouble getting virus samples out of China. We had less of an urgency then as to what needs to be done at a national level and I think that there were many delays in developing a test. And then when the tests were developed there were technical difficulties with the test. I mean, this is an entirely new test, a new virus, a new operation. And now most recently, the tests are being offered in adequate numbers by commercial labs but we're having trouble with other aspects of the testing supplies such as personal protective equipment and the test kits themselves.

John

And Jennifer, when should a person get tested? Again, there has been a lot of mixed messaging in the media about that.

Jennifer

Yeah, it's definitely confusing. Although the requirements for who can be tested loosened, not everyone needs to be tested. Right now, those tests really need to be preserved for those in most need. That would be those that have a significant illness or maybe at high risk. The tests also need to be preserved for people with symptoms. Currently, we are not testing people without symptoms, but the decision of who to test and when is being made by the healthcare provider. And I can say that our Washington State Department of Health is working real hard to increase testing capacity for local communities.

John

And Howard, if you are actually told that you need to be tested, what's the process?

Dr Leibrand

So the easiest way to get tested at this point in Skagit County is to go through your local provider. If they don't provide the tests themselves, then they will refer you to

the Acute Respiratory Clinics that are associated currently with Skagit Regional Health and soon to be developed by Anacortes Island Hospital and Sedro-Woolley's PeaceHealth United Hospital.

John

And how long does it take to get the results?

Dr Leibrand

I think that that's variable depending upon how busy the labs are and which lab you send it to. The turnaround time to actually do the test is just a matter of hours but there's transport times – getting the test to the facility. They have some paperwork processes they need to do so that the test can be properly reported. But most significantly, there's often a wait of a day or two to get the tests online.

John

So Jennifer, what does Public Health do if your results come back positive?

Jennifer

Yeah the first thing we do when we have a laboratory confirmed case is we contact that individual. We do an extensive interview process with them to be able to better understand when and where they may have gotten ill. We provide them with information on isolation and recommendations of how to stay safe and help keep others that may be in their household safe as well. The next step is contacting their close contacts while they either experience symptoms or 24 hours before. When we contact those individuals, if they are not symptomatic, we provide self-quarantine guidelines, which is 14 days and provide specific recommendations of how to do that safely. If those individuals – the close contacts – are symptomatic, then we ask them to go into isolation as well and provide them that guidance. One thing that's important to know too is that if the confirmed case has been in a group facility where there was more likelihood of close contacts, like maybe a school or other type of facility, then we contact the director of that facility so that we can get more information about other contacts that maybe weren't identified from the confirmed person, the confirmed case, and can expand our investigation from there. It's also important to know that Public Health does report publicly on our website daily – our confirmed cases, but be assured we're not providing sensitive or personal information. Right now we're only providing information about positive cases, if they were hospitalized, and soon we'll be starting to report cases if individuals that have recovered.

John

And if I get tested and I'm positive, what do I do?

Jennifer

So if you get tested, and you're positive, you need to stay home, you need to go into isolation. And what that means is, if possible in your home, to be – for the confirmed

case – to be in a room that only they are in and if possible, even better would be a restroom. If there's a separate restroom that the ill person can use and be separate from other people in the household, that's best. So the main thing to remember, if you test positive, is to not leave home, except for urgent medical care, and to not let visitors into your home. The other thing is other individuals that might be living in the household with you, for them to monitor their symptoms and for those individuals to practice strict hygiene practices, and to not share household items, such as plates, cups, glasses, silverware, those types of things.

John

So Howard, why are people that are asymptomatic not being tested?

Dr Leibrand

It all is a situation with capacity. At the present time, our list of criteria are based on the capacity that we have to do the testing. If the capacity to test increases, we will expand that. I think it would be useful to do testing on people who are asymptomatic, people who have minimum symptoms, who are not necessarily in a high-risk group. But at this time, we don't have the supplies to do that testing. We don't have the infrastructure in place for that test. The reason I think it would be useful to expand testing when the capacity becomes available, is that then we can do that same contact tracing that Jennifer was talking about to stop a potential arm of transmission of the disease because we now know that that person is positive and we can recommend that they take even more precautions about preventing the spread of disease than they're doing currently.

John

So Jennifer, what should I do if I feel I need to get tested but get turned away?

Jennifer

I think the first thing is just to stay calm. There's no medications to treat COVID-19. So, the treatment, whether you are able to get a test or not, is the same for mild symptoms. If you feel that you're someone that would be at higher risk for complications for respiratory infection, definitely contact your doctor and find out if you should be evaluated or should be tested. But the treatment is the same, if you are ill, if you have symptoms, you need to stay home for 7 days or for 72 hours after the symptoms go away which would be cough and fever, and a fever is considered anything higher than 100.4. But in general, no matter what your illness is and what your symptoms are, we're recommending that everyone stay home, and then even for those that aren't ill, we should all be trying to shelter in place as much as possible.

John

So Howard, there are advancements taking place at the moment with the testing process?

Dr Leibrand

Yeah, every day we're seeing new information about people producing the media and the swabs that we need. We see new information about new tests. I think that probably within the next weeks to months we will have tests that can be done at all of the usual laboratories, tests that can be done at point-of-care, like in emergency rooms and tests that give us almost immediate results, similar to the influenza test that we currently have.

John

So what should a person do if they seem to be asymptomatic, but they may have been around somebody that's possibly positive?

Jennifer

So if you are not exhibiting symptoms and you've had contact with someone that becomes a confirmed case, then what you need to do is you need to find out if you had contact with that individual while they were symptomatic or 24 hours before that. If you were in fact in contact with them during that time period then you need to go into self-quarantine for 14 days. If you were not in contact with them while they were symptomatic or the 24 hours before, then you do not need to self-quarantine. But of course, we're recommending that everyone shelter in place as much as possible.

John

Jennifer, forgive the complexity here, but what do I do if I come in contact with another person who may have been in contact with somebody that's tested positive?

Jennifer

So I think the best thing you can do is to find out if the person that you became in contact with, if they had contact with the confirmed case when the confirmed case was exhibiting symptoms or 24 hours before. If the person that you are in contact with, let's say a family member or friend or a coworker, was not in contact with that confirmed case while they were symptomatic, you do not need to do anything.

Dr Leibrand

So I think this last exchange just demonstrates the complexity of this. It's not possible to suss out every little connection and that is one of the main reasons that we've gone to the 'stay home, stay healthy' campaign, sort of to increase social distancing even in situations where we're not totally aware of ongoing transmission pathways. So I think we have to, at this time, consider that everyone we come in contact with, could indeed have the virus and that we at any moment could be coming down with the infection and not know it. That's the reason to stay home and stay healthy.

John

Can you actually get this virus more than once?

Dr Leibrand

We believe that you get full immunity from the virus from a symptomatic or an asymptomatic infection with the virus. Whether you knew you were sick or not, if you were infected, you do have antibodies against protection from the virus in the future. It hasn't been playing out long enough for us to really know how long that immunity lasts, or whether it is totally protective immunity but right now we feel that previous illness, even if you didn't have symptoms, does convey some protection against future illness.

John

So Jennifer, what's the benefit of testing, if the treatment's the same, with or without testing?

Jennifer

The main benefit would be the data, the information that we get from the testing. At Public Health, one of our biggest goals with this is to find out where and how the virus is being spread and is being transmitted. This data is really important so that we can target our interventions going forward so that we can help protect people and keep everyone healthy.

Dr Leibrand

And I think from a personal standpoint, if you know you have the disease, if you've tested positive, you are much more likely to do the things that you need to do to prevent transmission of that. That's unfortunate but that's human nature. We would like everybody to be just as careful as they can be and assume that they could transmit or contact someone else with the disease if they don't do the guidelines that we recommend and stay home and stay healthy.

John

And Howard, in Skagit County, where can you actually get tested?

Dr Leibrand

The most common tests right now are done at the Acute Respiratory Clinics that Skagit Valley Hospital has opened up at several locations. There's one at the main campus location just a block north of the emergency room, there's also another one at the Riverbend Clinic. Out of county, Skagit Regional Clinics has one at Cascade Hospital in Arlington and in addition, there are testing sites at other smaller clinics. There's testing sites at both PeaceHealth United General in Sedro-Woolley and Island Hospital in Anacortes. And you can find out more details about those by contacting the facility themselves or your primary provider.

John

So many questions. I look forward talking with both of you again on the next episode. Thanks Jennifer and Howard.

Jennifer

Thank you.