



Missoula City-County Health Department

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Health Officials Clarify COVID-19 Testing Procedures

Missoula City-County Health Department and local hospitals have received several calls regarding testing for COVID-19.

“There is a lot of confusion among the public about testing for COVID-19, mostly around the expectation that anyone can get a test,” said Cindy Farr, incident commander for the county’s response team. “It’s not as simple as testing everyone in the community.”

One of the most significant points of confusion is how the test works. The current test is not designed to screen people for their risk or exposure to the virus. It can only diagnose someone with COVID-19 who is showing symptoms.

Another challenge with testing is the number of test kits available. While the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services received approval to start testing for COVID-19 early last week, they had access to only 200 tests for the whole state, meaning resources need to be used judiciously. For a test to be completed at the state, local health care providers work with DPHHS and take into account a person’s likelihood of exposure, their symptoms, the severity of those symptoms, and the exclusion of other respiratory illnesses. These criteria were set to use resources effectively and ensure that those with a higher likelihood of having COVID-19 are diagnosed quickly.

Soon, a private lab will be able to process diagnostic tests for Missoula. While this is welcome news, that doesn’t change the nature of the test, as it is still a diagnostic test and not used for screening. It also does not increase the supply of tests, and health care providers will still need to assess the likelihood of COVID-19 before testing. While more testing is a good thing, Montana does not want labs overwhelmed with tests from unlikely candidates, resulting in delays diagnosing those who may have the disease.

“Hopefully, more resources will become available, but we need to work effectively with the resources we currently have,” Farr said. “Right now, the best tool we have in our community is prevention. Wash your hands, avoid close contact with people who are sick and disinfect surfaces frequently. If you do exhibit symptoms of fever, coughing or shortness of breath, call your medical provider first and stay home except when seeking medical treatment.”

For more information, call Public Information Officer Alisha Johnson at 406-258-3341. If you are a health care provider and have questions about testing, please call the Infectious Disease office. For all other

COVID-related questions, please call the hotline at 406-258-INFO or go online to <http://missoula.co/cvirus>.

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