



March 12, 2020

Travis County Medical Providers,

COVID-19 is not an equal opportunity threat and, similar to influenza, has had greater impacts on vulnerable populations, including those who are over the age of 70, and those who have underlying conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and lung disease.

If you are under the age of 50, the data that we have right now is that your risk of death is about 0.2%. As the age goes up, the risk increases. For those aged 80 and older, it appears that risk may be as high as 20%. If we can avoid infection in older people and really focus our efforts on protecting them, while managing the mild cases in people who are under the age of 50, we will be better prepared to respond to this event.

We at Austin Public Health understand your frustration with regards to testing for COVID-19. Please be aware that we are doing everything we can to enroll your patients and coordinate them for testing. Unfortunately, Texas is still limited in its capability to test and we will continue to need to prioritize testing based upon clinical and public health priorities.

We are therefore recommending local health providers refrain from sending symptomatic patients to the Emergency Department unless they are elderly or have underlying health conditions that make them more susceptible to infection or respiratory disease and therefore require that level of care or hospitalization.

We cannot test everybody at this stage and we really need to focus on those who either have a clinical impact or have a public health impact, for instance, if they live in a nursing home or assisted living facility. That's why we [issued orders earlier this week](#) which are aimed at securing long-term care facilities, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities from this threat. The support of local health providers in helping us target our resources where they can be most effective will be crucial.

We hope to soon have increased testing capability, and at that time we will provide a revised process to register your patients for testing, but we will still be prioritizing those who are hospitalized and those who are high risk for complications.

Please do not ask patients to call Public Health for testing, as we do not have testing capacity for patients other than those that we have designated as HIGH PRIORITY. At this time, all other testing requests should be routed to commercial or academic laboratories, such as LabCorp and Quest. If you do not have access to testing, please inform the patient that they cannot be tested yet, but that commercial testing is ramping up soon. Please tell them to isolate themselves at home away from other household members until 3 days (72 hours) after





complete resolution of symptoms. As an example, if the patient has symptoms that last for 7 days, they would self-isolate at home for 10 days total. We will have an isolation fact sheet for patients available shortly at our website austintexas.gov/covid19.

Attached is a flow chart to be used in conjunction with the DSHS testing guidance ([here](#)) to help you with prioritization of your patient for testing. Please understand that these recommendations are constantly changing and will continue to do so with changes in testing requests and testing capacity. Austin Public Health will ensure that we keep you updated as testing status changes. If you have any concerns please feel free to contact us. We politely ask for your patience as we are monitoring and responding to issues related to this outbreak throughout the region.

We will be successful in managing this pandemic if we work together as one community. It is important that we all continue to evaluate patients with febrile illness in our usual manner, develop a differential diagnosis, and consider other possibilities for their presentation beyond COVID-19. Patients should not be sent to the Emergency Department with the only purpose of testing. If you believe that the patient needs COVID-19 testing following exclusion of other diagnoses, please contact Austin Public Health at (512) 972-5555 and we will review the case, assess the priority level for testing, and arrange to pick up testing you collect or will arrange to have the individual tested.

We all must all do what we can to manage the other pandemic of fear and we need your support in this effort as well. I have been encouraging the public to use telehealth resources to initiate physician contact for febrile illness to begin this triage process to help manage the fear and ensure access to clinicians. Please help us to calm the fears that your patient populations are expressing by providing facts and information through active outreach.

Thank you for everything that you do every day for our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark E. Escott, MD MPH FACEP FAEMS NRP'.

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Medical Director
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