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U.S.

Health Centers Ramp Up Drive-Through Testing for Coronavirus

The practice is a way to meet rising demand while avoiding the risk of patients infecting health-care workers and other patients



A healthcare worker collected samples this week at a coronavirus drive-through testing station in Denver.

PHOTO: JIM URQUHART/REUTERS

By Peter Loftus and Talal Ansari

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U.S. hospitals and public-health labs are adding drive-through testing for the new coronavirus, part of a wider effort to ramp up testing after it lagged in the outbreak's earlier weeks.

Sites in states such as California, New York, and Pennsylvania have started drive-up testing in recent days and companies including CVS Health Corp. have pledged to offer coronavirus tests in secure areas of some store parking lots. Typically, drivers or passengers who have a doctor's order are asked to stay in their cars while health-care workers collect nasal and oral swabs to be tested for the virus. Results aren't given on the spot, however—specimens are sent to labs with a turnaround time typically within a few days.

On Friday, the Trump administration said a new website would be created to help people find coronavirus testing locations. After filling out a questionnaire, patients are to be directed to the nearest drive-through location if they meet certain criteria.

Drive-through testing is a way to meet rising demand while avoiding the risk that infected patients spread the virus to health-care workers and other patients in hospitals or doctor's offices. Before the drive-through sites opened, patients typically had to provide specimens at doctors' offices or hospitals.

The approach gained traction in South Korea, which has tested many more people for coronavirus than in the U.S.

On Friday, a drive-through testing site opened in the city of New Rochelle, N.Y., a hotbed for the outbreak of the new coronavirus and the respiratory disease it causes, Covid-19. The facility, operated by private hospital system Northwell Health, will be open for the "trajectory of the disease," Gov. Andrew Cuomo said.

Demand has been heavy for tests at a drive-through outside the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Denver lab, said spokesman Ian Dickson. On Thursday, about 326 people showed up, and many had to wait about four to five hours before getting sampled. Collecting samples took only about five to 10 minutes, the spokesman said.

"Eventually there were so many people in line that we had to cut it off," Mr. Dickson said. Testing resumed Friday but wasn't scheduled for the weekend.



Medical personnel secured a sample at a drive-through coronavirus testing station at a Kaiser Permanente facility in San Francisco.

PHOTO: JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

California-based health network Kaiser Permanente is offering drive-up tests to members who meet Centers for Disease Control and Prevention criteria for testing, and have a doctor's order.

The CDC says physicians should use their judgment to determine if a patient has signs and symptoms of Covid-19, and whether the patient should be tested. The CDC said physicians may prioritize hospitalized patients with symptoms, older adults and people with chronic medical conditions. The guidance said priorities for testing include patients with symptoms who had close contact with a suspected or confirmed infected person or history of travel to an affected region within 14 days of the start of symptoms.

A Kaiser drive-up testing site was operational on a trial basis in San Francisco Thursday and in Redwood City Friday, said a health network spokesman. After being screened in their cars, patients are instructed to self-quarantine while awaiting results and monitoring for symptoms.

A limited supply of tests are available, and are only for "high-risk patients who meet specific criteria," the Kaiser statement read. Test processing times can take anywhere from four to seven days.

Located outside Philadelphia, Abington Hospital-Jefferson Health set up virus testing in a parking lot across the street from a main hospital facility on Thursday, said Christopher Notte, medical chief for the Jefferson Health division. Initially, it's being used for patients referred by physicians in the Jefferson network.

Generally, testing is reserved for people with Covid-19 symptoms who have had contact with a confirmed case or have traveled to a region where the virus has spread. Doctors evaluate whether to test other symptomatic people on a case-by-case basis, Dr. Notte said.

The Abington lot entrance was blocked by a barrier and orange cones on Friday morning. A security guard wearing a blue mask was greeting drivers and directing those with doctor's orders for a test to wait in parking spots and not leave their cars



A police officer manned a checkpoint on a road leading to a drive-through testing center in New Rochelle, N.Y., the site of an outbreak.

PHOTO: JUSTIN LANE/SHUTTERSTOCK

Once patients entered the lot, a physician called them on their phones to ask questions about symptoms. Other workers brought bags containing a surgical mask and instructions for self-quarantining to leave on vehicle windshields and walked away. The patients pulled bags in through windows and donned masks during the evaluation.

A doctor wearing a blue gown and mask emerged from a nearby building pushing a specimen-collection cart to one waiting car parked between red patio umbrellas.

The doctor took nasal and oral swabs, and the patient drove off. Three more cars pulled up within 15 minutes and waited to provide samples.

The specimens are being sent to either public-health labs or commercial lab services. Dr. Notte said he expects results will be returned within three to four days. The hospital system will notify doctors, and in some cases patients may receive notifications electronically.

“Unfortunately because of limited capacity for testing there’s just a limited amount of equipment nationwide to do the testing,” Dr. Notte said. He said turnaround times could get longer as more people are tested.

The health system initially planned to have two people working on drive-through testing but has expanded to at least five. On Thursday there were more than a dozen people tested, and

more on Friday.

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