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To: Healthcare Providers, Clinical Laboratories and Local Boards of Health
From: Catherine M. Brown, DVM, MSc, MPH, State Epidemiologist
Larry Madoff, MD, Medical Director, BIDLS
Sandra Smole, PhD, Director, State Public Health Laboratory
Date: May 13, 2020
RE: Testing of Persons with Suspect COVID-19

This document includes guidance about appropriate use of laboratory testing for COVID-19 and expands testing recommendations for COVID-19 in commercial and clinical laboratories. In addition, it indicates which subset of specimens can be submitted to the MA State Public Health Laboratory (SPHL).

INDIVIDUALS ELIGIBLE FOR COVID-19 TESTING

Individuals listed below should be tested for presence of the virus using a molecular diagnostic test such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or other nucleic acid amplification methodology.

Symptomatic Individuals: All symptomatic individuals in Massachusetts, even those with mild symptoms, should be tested. Symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- Fever, chills or shaking chills,
- Signs of a lower respiratory illness (e.g., cough, shortness of breath, lowered oxygen saturation),
- Fatigue, sore throat, headache, body aches/myalgia, or new loss of sense of taste or smell
- Other less common symptoms can include gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g. nausea, vomiting, diarrhea), rash, and inflammatory conditions such as “COVID toes”.
- In elderly, chronically ill, or debilitated individuals such as residents of a long-term care facility, symptoms of COVID-19 may be subtle such as alterations in mental status or in blood glucose control

Close Contacts of COVID Cases: All individuals in Massachusetts identified as a close contact by a Local Board of Health, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Community Tracing Collaborative, or a healthcare provider should be tested.

Close contact is defined as:

- a) Being less than 6 feet of a COVID-19 case for at least 10-15 minutes. Close contact can occur while caring for, living with, visiting, or sharing a healthcare waiting area or room with a COVID-19 case while the case was symptomatic or within the 48 hours before symptom onset.
- OR**
- b) Having direct contact with infectious secretions of a COVID-19 case (e.g., being coughed on) while not wearing recommended personal protective equipment or PPE (e.g., gown, gloves, facemask, eye protection).

Recommended timing of testing for close contacts:

- Close contacts with any symptom associated with COVID-19 should be tested promptly and should occur at any time during the contact's 14-day quarantine period, even if the person previously had a negative test result within that same period.
- Close contacts without symptoms should be tested as soon as possible after they are notified of their exposure to COVID-19. The contact is required to quarantine for the full 14 days, even following a negative test result.

Asymptomatic Individuals: Asymptomatic individuals can be recommended for diagnostic testing at the discretion of their healthcare provider, a state agency, or an employer. Individuals are encouraged to confirm with their insurance whether the test will be covered.

Serology Testing:

Commercially manufactured antibody tests check for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies and are available through healthcare providers and commercial laboratories. Although FDA, CDC, and BARDA are collaborating to assess the performance of commercial antibody tests, the majority of tests currently available have not received FDA Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). Antibody tests may demonstrate whether an individual was previously infected with SARS-CoV-2 and antibody testing is important to help understand how many people in a population have been exposed to the virus. However, antibody tests are not indicated for diagnostic purposes. In order to be appropriately interpreted, more data are needed on the performance characteristics of these tests, the immune response to COVID-19, the timing and duration of antibody response, and how antibodies correlate to protective immunity.

- **If an antibody test is performed, it is recommended that healthcare providers order a molecular diagnostic test at the same time.**
- **At this time, antibody testing should not be used to guide release from isolation or for return to work purposes and are not indicated for diagnostic purposes.**

TESTING AT SPHL

Prior to sending more than 50 samples at one time from a facility, call 617-983-6800 to confirm that adequate capacity is available to maintain a 24-48 hour turnaround time for these test requests. Priorities for testing at the SPHL are aimed at identifying places where public health action could be used to reduce the transmission of disease and to protect:

- The healthcare and critical infrastructure workforces.
- Residents in congregate settings where transmission occurs easily, especially when individuals at higher risk for severe disease are involved.

A single nasopharyngeal (NP) swab is preferred for submission. For complete SPHL information on alternate specimen types, specimen collection and submission, please review the [COVID-19 State Public Health Laboratory FAQ](#).

This guidance is not intended to cover every possible situation. To discuss specific scenarios, please call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health at 617-983-6800 available 24/7.