

Updated March 23, 2020

(Note: Information may change with rapidly changing circumstances.)

The Public Health Department strongly supports expanding the availability of testing for COVID-19. The current lack of widespread testing capacity nationwide and locally has significantly hampered our ability to monitor the epidemic, to focus mitigation measures, and to inform individual people of their infection status. Unfortunately, local and national testing resources have not scaled to the extent that we expected, and not everyone who is ill can be tested at this time.

The Testing Situation in Santa Clara County


In Santa Clara County, we obtained CDC approval to perform the first COVID-19 test in our public health laboratory on February 26, 2020. The role of the local public health laboratory is limited: it serves as a specialty *reference laboratory* offering testing for emerging infections such as COVID-19 while other laboratory sectors (commercial and academic) come on-line to test for those new diseases. For example, at the beginning of the West Nile Virus epidemic, only public health laboratories were able to test for West Nile Virus, but West Nile Virus testing was very soon offered widely in the commercial sector. In the United States, unlike in some other countries, high volume testing is done exclusively by commercial private sector labs.

The County's public health laboratory is able to run a maximum of 100 tests per day. We receive all of our test kits from the CDC. The number of patients we can test is much less than the number of test kits. This is because some tests are used as controls and multiple samples may be submitted for each patient to ensure accurate results. Our local public health laboratory, like all public health laboratories, functions as a specialty reference laboratory and as a bridge laboratory to enable testing to occur while other laboratory sectors come on-line. The lab is not structured, physically and otherwise, to scale to commercial-volume testing. As a result, the current focus of the public health laboratory testing is to ensure that hospitalized patients get tested, as well as people who live or work in high risk settings such as long-term care facilities, healthcare professionals, and first responders, while we continue waiting for large-scale testing capacity to come on line through the commercial labs.

Testing Occurring Outside the Public Health Laboratory

While we know how many patients total are tested each day in our local public health laboratory, we do not know how many people in Santa Clara County, overall, are being tested in other labs. Large commercial laboratories have begun testing and have provided testing for patients of many different private and public healthcare delivery systems and test collection sites. Some companies operate specimen collection sites but do not run their own tests; instead, they send those specimens to commercial labs for testing.

Only positive test results are mandated to be reported to the County Public Health Department. Laboratories are not currently required to report negative results. Because of this, the Public Health



Department only knows how many people test positive for COVID-19, but we do not know the total number of people living in Santa Clara County who are being tested for COVID-19. We are currently working on getting commercial labs to report all results to the Public Health Department. We are also working with the State and neighboring jurisdictions to obtain greater information about testing by private labs locally and regionally.

What do we know about the extent of spread of COVID-19 in Santa Clara County?

The increase in confirmed cases over time, as well as several other data points, indicate that the virus is now widespread in our county. Because of limited testing capacity, the Public Health laboratory has focused its very limited testing capacity on testing patients with more severe illness and in high-risk, critical roles like healthcare workers and first responders. Because of this, and because we are not testing people without any symptoms, the number of cases that we detect through testing are only a small portion of the total number of people infected in the county. In addition, because we are primarily testing hospitalized patients, the cases we detect are more likely than the total number of infected persons to be seriously ill and are more likely to be hospitalized.

Why isn't the Public Health Department reporting the location of people who test positive?

Our current data indicate that the virus is widespread in the county and, therefore, everyone in the county has a risk of exposure to the virus regardless of where in the county they live. Every hospital in the county is caring for patients who have COVID-19. Providing information on individual cases, therefore, does not provide any benefit to the public, and may instead mislead those not living in a neighborhood with many confirmed cases to falsely think that they are at lower risk.

As noted above, the Public Health Department is asking laboratories who are running COVID-19 tests to report both positive and negative results, along with other key information, so that we can better understand whether there are areas of the community that are experiencing more intense transmission.

How many patients have been tested to date in Santa Clara County?

As of March 22, 2020, the Public Health laboratory has tested 1044 samples, for 647 individual patients.

How much time does it take to get a result?

This varies by laboratory and the number of specimens awaiting testing. The Public Health Laboratory usually has results within 24 hours of receiving a sample.