Q & A Physicians' Offices

Information about COVID-19 is changing rapidly. In an effort to keep our healthcare partners updated on the latest information and guidance as it relates to recognizing and testing patients for the disease, Wake County Public Health has compiled some of the questions we are being asked frequently. We hope that these Q&As will help providers get the information they need about this evolving situation while also providing a better of understanding public health's role in working to contain this novel coronavirus in partnership with healthcare providers within the community.

What are symptoms of COVID-19?
Most confirmed cases of COVID-19 develop fever and/or symptoms of acute respiratory illness, such as cough and difficulty breathing.

Who is at risk for contracting COVID-19?
People who have been within close contact with a laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 patient within 14 days of symptom onset, or a history of travel from affected geographies within 14 days of symptom onset.

What should I do with a patient who is exhibiting the symptoms associated with COVID-19?
Whenever possible, healthcare providers should screen patients before they come into their facility. During a phone screening, providers should ask about a person's symptoms. If available, telemedicine can be used to work with these patients.

If the patient is experiencing lower respiratory symptoms and fever, they should be advised to isolate at home for at least 14 days. They should also be advised to follow up with their provider if their symptoms are not getting better.

If, however, their symptoms become more serious, patients should be advised to call 9-1-1 and disclose their symptoms so that emergency medical providers can take appropriate steps in transporting the patient to a facility where they can be treated.

Patients who enter a healthcare facility exhibiting fever and lower respiratory symptoms should be masked immediately and providers should ensure proper use of personal protective equipment. The patient should be separated from other patients, ideally in a well-ventilated space.

Who should be tested for COVID-19?
Physicians should first rule out other possible illness. The criteria for testing for COVID-19 has been expanded by NC DHHS. Testing is appropriate for those who meet the following criteria should be tested for COVID-19:

- Patient with fever or lower respiratory symptoms (cough, shortness of breath) and close contact (within 6 feet of the patient for 10 minutes or more) with a confirmed or presumptive COVID-19 case within the past 14 days
- Patient with fever and lower respiratory symptoms (cough, shortness of breath) and a **negative** rapid flu test

Please do not test patients who are not sick or who have already recovered from a respiratory illness.

Each time a provider tests a patient for COVID-19, the practice must:
- Fill out a [PUI form](#) and fax it to the Wake County Public Health (919-212-9291) and the state.
- Tell patient to [stay home and away from others](#) until they receive a negative COVID-19 test result AND they no longer have symptoms, unless they need to seek medical care.

What if one of my patients tests positive for COVID-19?
If the result of the LabCorp test is positive, healthcare providers must notify the patient and advise that they be isolated at home. In addition, other people in the patient's home should remain quarantined at home, away from the patient.

The patient should also be advised that if they begin to experience severe symptoms to call their healthcare provider before going to the provider's office. In the case of a medical emergency, patients should call 9-1-1 and disclose that they have been diagnosed with COVID-19 so that emergency providers can be sure to respond appropriately.

Once a test is confirmed positive, Wake County Public Health will contact the patient to initiate contact tracing. This includes reaching out to the healthcare provider to determine whether any practice staff had a significant exposure.

Please note that false negative results are possible. If COVID-19 testing is negative, consider if patient's recent exposure and clinical presentation are consistent with COVID-19. Retesting should be considered in consultation with local public health.

How can our office test for COVID-19?
Physician offices may test for COVID-19 through [LabCorp](#), whether or not the practice has a contract with LabCorp. Healthcare providers anywhere in the U.S. may order LabCorp's COVID-19 test, which detects the presence of the underlying virus that causes the disease.

How is the specimen is collected?
COVID-19 testing requires specimens collected from the nose, throat or lungs. These specimens must be collected by a healthcare provider. Details on how to collect specimens can be found on [LabCorp's site here](#) and [here](#).

If a provider elects to test a patient for COVID-19, the practice should inform the North Carolina health department and/or Wake County's Health Department at 919-404-7575. Positive results will be called in to the ordering physician or health care provider, as well as reported to the appropriate public health agencies, including North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and Wake County.

LabCorp tests do NOT require confirmation testing from the CDC.

For more questions and answers about LabCorps's test and how it is administered, [click here](#).

What is the risk to my staff and providers?
There is still much to learn about COVID-19. Based on what is currently known, spread is thought to occur mostly through respiratory droplets. Infectious secretions include sputum, serum, blood and

respiratory droplets. If close contact occurs while not wearing appropriate personal protective equipment, health care providers may be at risk of infection.

What steps can healthcare providers take to protect staff?
Some things providers and practices can do to protect staff include:

- Review infection prevention and control guidelines on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website
- Enforce proper hand hygiene practices before and after all patient contact
- Ask patients with respiratory symptoms to wear a mask and/or separate them from other patients and staff
- Assess and triage patients with acute respiratory symptoms and risk factors for COVID-19. Ideally, do this before they enter the facility
- Use standard and transmission-based precautions when caring for possible COVID-19 patients
- Consider using telemedicine to evaluate suspected cases of COVID-19.

Should I send my patients that need COVID-19 testing to the Wake County Health Department for testing?
Medical providers can test patients using the LabCorp test. Providers should **NOT** send patients to the Wake County Health Department to be tested as public health is prioritizing testing for those people who have been in close contact with presumptive positive individuals. "Close contact" is defined as people who have been within six feet for at least 10 minutes. In these specific cases, Wake County Public Health is testing patients in their homes. Of course, Wake County clinics will follow the guidelines and methods for testing that all other physicians' offices are following.

If your patient has been in contact with a known COVID-19 positive case, please call the public health COVID-19 information line at 919-856-7044 for further direction.

Are there any other resources available to evaluate patients?
UNC is working to establish a respiratory diagnostic center to evaluate patients with possible COVID-19.

Additional Information
Additional information for healthcare providers can be found on the [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services website](#) as well as on the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention site](#).