

With the continually-evolving situation of COVID-19 (coronavirus), it can be difficult to keep up with the newest information and recommendations, especially at a local level. Dr. Raghavendra Tirupathi, Medical Director of Keystone Infectious Diseases, has answered some frequently asked questions related to the latest updates about COVID-19 in today's article.

What testing is available and how long does it take to get results?

Nasal swab testing is available in various locations across the county. At Keystone Health, you can go to the tents at 820 Fifth Avenue or 111 Chambers Hill Drive in Chambersburg, or our downtown office at 51 S. Main Street. Results are usually back in two days. If you plan to visit your primary care provider or an urgent care center for testing, call the office if you are feeling sick with respiratory symptoms. By calling ahead before arriving, you can help them be prepared so fewer people are exposed to the possible infection.

Antibody testing is another form of testing which is used to determine immunity to COVID-19. It is not available yet but should be in the coming weeks.

Is a vaccine available?

Not yet but several ongoing research studies are attempting to find a vaccine. The research involves three phases and we may have an effective vaccine in about a year if everything goes as planned.

Masking is now mandatory in Pennsylvania when visiting life-sustaining businesses. What are your tips for using masks?

Cloth masks should be worn when you are outside of your home, especially when going to an essential business. Make sure you can breathe through it but the mask should fit snugly around your nose and mouth. You should wash your hands before putting the mask on and after removing it. Avoid touching the mask while you are using it, and when taking off the mask avoid touching the front of it as that is where the most germs are. Masks should be washed after each use. Avoid using masks on children younger than two years of age, and avoid using N95 or surgical masks as they are needed by healthcare workers. Even when you are wearing a mask you should continue to practice social distancing. If you do not already have a mask, you can find instructions on how to make one at home at www.health.pa.gov.

How important is social distancing and why is it important?

Social distancing is critical to slowing the spread of this virus and is the only effective measure we have against it at this time. By everyone doing their part, we can work together to save lives. Please stay at home except for: doing tasks that are necessary for your health and safety, getting groceries or other needed supplies for yourself or someone else, working at a life-sustaining business or caring for a person or pet in another household. You can still go outdoors to get some fresh air and exercise, but it is important to maintain social distancing even when you are outside.

What are some other practical tips people can use to keep themselves healthy?

It is very important for people to follow good hand hygiene by washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and using hand sanitizer if soap and water is not available. Following good cough and respiratory etiquette is also important. Cough into elbows or sleeves and dispose of tissues into a closed trash bin. Avoid touching your face, eyes, nose or mouth and clean surfaces frequently. Maintain social distancing in all forms.

When going to the grocery store wear a mask, use delivery or pickup if possible and plan to buy groceries for one to two weeks. Wipe off the handle of your cart or basket, be mindful about practicing social distancing and respect the shopping hours which are designated for people who are at a higher risk. You should sanitize your hands often while in the store and wash your hands upon returning home.

What else should people keep in mind during this time?

In the age of social media, it's very important that people get their information from reliable sources. The Pennsylvania Department of Health or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are good options to get accurate updates about COVID-19.

It's possible that some people may be feeling lonely and isolated during this time. Seek help if you are feeling anxious and/or depressed. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Disaster Distress Helpline can be reached by calling 1-800-985-5990 or texting TalkWithUs to 66746 (TTY 1-800-846-8517).

We know that most people are getting tired of staying at home. It's easy and natural to get frustrated, especially when there is so much anxiety and uncertainty in the world right now. But one thing is for sure - social distancing is working in our state and across the country. Please know that you are saving lives by staying home. Many healthcare workers and first responders in our own counties are working very hard to save lives as they risk their own every day. Please make their efforts worthwhile and help them help all of us.

This article contains general information only and should not be used as a substitute for professional diagnosis, treatment or care by a qualified health care provider.