**What Should I Do If I Can't Get Tested for COVID-19?**

Testing patients for COVID-19 has three general purposes- so we can perform contact tracing, so we can effectively isolate the hospitalized patient and so we can have a better understanding of the epidemiology.  To understand the benefit of testing, we need to better understand these three factors.

Let's take the first goal- contact tracing.  Early in an outbreak, knowing who was exposed is extremely helpful, which is the goal of contract tracing. That person can be watched to see if they develop symptoms and we can then recommend that they avoid exposing other people during the incubation period.  The incubation period is the time after a person was exposed to an infectious disease and before they develop symptoms. For COVID-19, we believe that time period can be up to fourteen days.

The issue with contact tracing has been that it generally starts once someone develops significant enough symptoms to warrant coming to medical attention.  To make matters more difficult, the symptoms of COVID-19 can be similar to other circulating viruses, making it very hard to be certain which virus a patient has without testing.  Testing is not only limited in availability currently but can then take upwards of a week to return an answer. Contact tracing by that point is often less helpful, since it could be almost two weeks after a patient first developed symptoms.

The second reason to do testing is to help hospitals appropriately isolate patients.  There are limited supplies of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare professionals.  Understanding which hospitalized patients do or do not have COVID-19 would better allow them to appropriately use PPE and guide staffing.  This is really important for hospitals, but it does not impact patients who are at home and not very ill.

The third reason to do testing is to better understand the epidemiology of COVID-19. The more we understand about who has it, the more we'll understand how it's spread, how significant the illness is and how best to combat it.  This is very important from a public health community, but not as important to an individual patient.

As of now, COVID-19, does not have a specific medical treatment. Similar to many other viruses, the care is supportive. Most patients have mild disease and recover by staying home with routine guidance like any other viral illness: ensuring hydration and resting.  Since there is no specific treatment, from an individual patient's perspective, having a positive test can help provide clarity, but it doesn't change our supportive care.

The other concern from an individual's perspective is how to prevent others from getting sick. Again, this is very similar to how we should handle other viral illnesses.  Currently, everyone is being asked to maintain social distancing.  People who are sick should absolutely limit any unnecessary exposure to others.  Within a household, a sick person should isolate themselves into their own room and ideally, utilize one bathroom just for themselves.  The general

recommendations are that you continue this isolation for at least seven days from when the symptoms began and for at least three days after your fever has resolved and you feel better.

So, what is a patient to do if they think they might have COVID-19 and cannot get tested?  First, don't panic.  If you are feeling ill, reach out to your physician.  If you are ill enough that you feel like you need to go the emergency room, then go, just let the ER know immediately that you have fever and cough so they can protect themselves.  If you feel well enough to stay home, follow the guidelines above and take good care of yourself.

Remember, most people will be just fine and we've all had viral illnesses in the past.  Now is the time for us to pull together, do what we need to take care of ourselves and our family, but also to protect other more fragile community members.  This is our time to shine as a community.  We can do this.