

HOT TOPIC #15: April 13th

Testing: The Current Situation

COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders.

It has been nearly a month since the release of Hot Topic #1, which also focused on testing. Since then, a lot has changed, but some things remain the same. This article is going to give an update on testing, and take a guess at what the future might hold.

Initial shortages of testing capacity have lessened a bit. The labs on the mainland that process tests are closing in on being able to do 10,000 tests a day across Washington and that will likely double in the next few weeks. Testing supplies are still limited, but less so than before. High risk and severely symptomatic islanders have been tested and more than 300 tests have been completed in San Juan County as of April 13th. Testing will continue and the number of tests performed will vary depending on availability of resources and the number of priority patients needing testing.

Most local medical providers continue to provide an incredible service to the islands by offering testing. By doing so, their staff are doing something that is challenging, stressful, and has a degree of risk to it. They should be celebrated and treated as true heroes by their island neighbors.

Clearly community members have questions and concerns about the lack of broadly available testing. We understand why there is a desire for expanded testing of everyone who is symptomatic, and eventually even for those without symptoms. For now, testing supplies and lab capacity remain limited across the country and throughout Washington. The focus of testing continues to be prioritizing those likely to become the most sick, and those most likely to be at risk due to their line of work.

We'd love to see widespread testing both in our community and across the globe. Increased test capacity would be a huge help towards disease containment as it would allow us to more precisely know how wide-spread COVID-19 is and give us a better picture of how it is spread. That said, it is important to remember that while a negative test result may be reassuring, it doesn't protect against COVID-19. As long as the disease remains present in the islands, there will be the potential for the virus to spread. As ever, the most important and impactful thing we can do is continue our good work to flatten the curve.

Testing is vital, but remember, most people who contract COVID-19 have [mild illness](#) and are able to [recover at home](#).

At the moment, with limited supplies and slowly expanding capacity, providers are following testing guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Washington State Department of Health (DOH). These organizations don't use the same exact system or terminology, and we've had to simplify things a bit to explain clearly, but in general here's what they say:

PRIORITY 1 (top priority when supplies are extremely limited)

- Patients with severe COVID-19 symptoms
- Frontline healthcare workers with symptoms

PRIORITY 2 (those who can also be tested if provider supplies and capacity allow)

- Patients 65 and older, with underlying conditions, and symptoms
- Frontline first responders with symptoms

PRIORITY 3 (next stage of testing, if provider supplies and capacity allow)

- Individuals with symptoms in times of active spread in a community
- Frontline healthcare and EMS providers without symptoms

NON-PRIORITY (when capacity and supplies are large)

- Individuals without symptoms

At the moment, island providers are testing Priority 1 and 2 patients. It is possible that some providers with the capacity to do so may soon start testing Priority 3. If so, it will be done with the understanding that Priorities 1 and 2 always come first. It will likely still be some time until general testing for those without symptoms is available. It is possible that availability of testing may change over time, becoming more available, then less, then more again. We're confident the trend will be towards increased testing.

Please know that even when all of the test supplies and lab capacity we want are available, island providers could still be limited by the availability of personal protective equipment or staff to perform the actual tests. There's a lot of great coordination happening that will hopefully avoid that, but a full roll out of extensive testing will take time, and it will take time for providers to provide the actual service. Please be patient and be understanding- they're literally working non-stop to respond to this crisis.

While the medical community will continue to provide fast and responsive testing of our most concerning patients, the rest of us need to remain completely focused on social distancing, limiting the possibility of spread, and knowing that we're not out of the woods yet. You are doing a great job. Please keep it up.