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CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

UPDATES

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Covid Testing Shortages Not Going Away, Public Lab Leader Warns

- Current shortages for basic lab supplies like pipette tips
- Manufacturers still struggling to ramp up supplies to meet demand

By Jacquie Lee | August 11, 2020 3:13PM ET

Expect shortages of lab supplies like pipette tips, chemical reagents, and saline to continue throughout the pandemic, a public health lab leader told reporters Tuesday.

Manufacturing strain for companies producing chemicals specific for Covid-19 tests aren't likely to disappear anytime soon, Eric Blank, the chief program officer for the Association of Public Health Laboratories, said. The labs doing virus testing also have to compete for basic equipment with laboratories doing work unrelated to the pandemic.

"Shortages we're seeing now are shortages that are agnostic to those tests," Blank said. "They're just generally essential lab supplies for any kind of testing in any kind of lab."

However, shortages won't be as dramatic as they were in March, he anticipated. But they'll continue because "even big manufacturers are having challenges getting things they need to fully ramp up," Blank said.

Continued supply issues and an impending flu season mean public health officials must be smarter about testing, Blank and other health specialists said Tuesday. Tests aren't all the same and are best utilized in different ways.

Keeping track of where the flu or Covid-19 is spreading in the U.S. would probably be most efficient using pool sampling, which tests bigger batches of samples, rather than individual diagnostic tests, Rachel Levine, head of the Pennsylvania Department of Health, said.

Groups like the Association of Public Health Laboratories and state health leaders are grappling with the idea that "we'll face shortages, so how do we make the best use of public resources?" Blank said.

Local Strategies

The country's virus testing capability ebbed and flowed since March.

In the early spring, there weren't enough kits to do widespread testing. Once manufacturers and labs adjusted to new technology and ramped up their production, there was a boom in testing demand. Labs then struggled to get results back to people quickly, citing demand and supply strains.

However, commercial labs like Quest Diagnostics are cutting turnaround times for tests down to two or three days rather than a week or longer, the lab said Monday.

“We do have some backlog, but expect to complete testing and reporting results by early this week of outstanding test specimens that have waited, in some cases, longer than a week due to the recent surge in demand,” Kim Gorode, a spokeswoman for Quest, told Bloomberg Law. “At that point, we hope to be at a turnaround time of two to three days for all patients.”

The Department of Health and Human Services now estimates that “nearly 90% of all tests are being completed within 3 days,” it said Tuesday.

Other specialists are pushing for a more cohesive federal strategy for testing.

“This is really not something we should be doing on a 50 state by state basis,” Jennifer Nuzzo, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said. It’s not clear if the same problems exist in every state, and without a clear picture, it’s hard to find a solution, she said.

The American Medical Association also wants updated testing prioritization guidelines.

“In light of surging demand for non-medically indicated tests, updating prioritization guidelines would ensure testing capacity for those with COVID symptoms, known exposures, and those in need of pre-procedure testing,” the group said Tuesday.

The Health and Human Services Department [released state testing plans](#) Monday. There were [various themes connecting state responses](#)—like concerns about shortages and interest in expanding networks of labs and contact tracers—but each state’s plan was unique to its circumstances.

A “locally executed, state-managed, and federally supported” testing strategy has been the Trump administration’s approach to the pandemic since March, the HHS said in a statement.

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Rob Smith

Managing Director

300 Tingey Street SE | Suite 202

Washington, DC | 20003

202.261.4000 office | 202.258.5486 mobile

www.mercuryllc.com