Returning to Work: Why COVID-19 Testing is not a Recommended Strategy

Across the county, there is an increase in the number of individuals seeking testing for COVID-19 and testing sites are experiencing longer wait times. While this is an encouraging sign that the public has a high awareness of the risk of COVID-19, many of these individuals do not have symptoms and it's not necessary for them to get tested.

El Paso County Public Health (EPCPH) recommends that people without symptoms (known as asymptomatic individuals) should not be tested, except in limited situations where they are working with high-risk individuals, like nursing home staff, or in situations where their doctor has ordered the test prior to a surgical procedure. A negative test only indicates that the individual was unlikely to be infectious at the time the test was collected and does not reveal anything about the individual's risk of becoming infectious later.

Therefore, testing is not recommended as a strategy for clearing asymptomatic individuals to return to work in businesses after they have tested positive or been exposed to someone with COVID-19. If an individual has been exposed to someone with COVID-19, they should instead quarantine for a full 14 days.

Instead of a return-to-work testing policy, businesses are advised to implement these precautions:

- Maintain rigorous screening protocols of employees when they arrive at work
- Create policies enforcing masking and social distancing
- Practice frequent cleaning and disinfection
- Create leave policies that remove barriers for staff staying home when they are ill

The table below provides recommendations on who should and should not be tested.

Who should NOT be tested	
Individuals with no symptoms – even if they have come in close contact with a known case	Testing is not recommended for asymptomatic individuals who have been exposed to the virus. Receiving a negative test during the 14 days following an exposure does not eliminate the need to complete the full 14-day quarantine.
Individuals who are going back to work or traveling	Testing is not recommended as a strategy for clearing asymptomatic individuals. A negative test only indicates that the person was unlikely to be infectious at the time the test was collected.

Individuals who recently tested positive for COVID-19	Individuals who tested positive for the virus should not be tested again. All individuals receiving a test are required to isolate for a minimum of 10 days.
Individuals without COVID-19 who are returning to a high-risk setting	In high-risk settings, people who are newly admitted should be quarantined for 14-days to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
Individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 and are returning to a high-risk setting	Individuals who have recovered from the virus may persist in having a positive PCR result because of the presence of unviable viral RNA. This does not mean they are infectious. Time and symptom-based strategy is sufficient to remove isolation precautions.
Who should be tested	
Individuals with symptoms of COVID-19	CDC, CDPHE, EPCPH and community partners have prioritized testing for symptomatic individuals.
Individuals who will be undergoing medical procedures within 48 hours of the test	PCR tests may detect virus in pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic people. This has some utility in preventing exposures in healthcare facilities even though this is a point-in-time-assessment of the individuals' COVID-19 status.
Individuals who live or work in a congregate setting with recent cases of COVID-19	Repeated, widespread testing in these settings is recommended to facilitate cohorting of individuals with COVID-19.

You can find more best practices and guidance for businesses and employers on Public Health's website at https://www.elpasocountyhealth.org/businesses-and-employers.

Learn more about Preventing, Reporting and Mitigating Workplace Outbreaks During COVID-19