

Moving toward a brighter future

By Dr. Robin Johnson, M.D., M.P.H., El Paso County Public Health Medical Director

With the recent move from Colorado's Stay at Home phase to the Safer at Home phase, we are witnessing the return of many of the components of a sustainable lifestyle.

It's an exciting step, one we have reached only through partnerships and the cooperation of all of you who have practiced physical distancing, worn masks, and stayed home to flatten the curve. But as we move forward, we can't let our guard down. We will need to continue safeguards to contain COVID-19, as well as focused research to help us understand this virus and mount a more effective offense against it.

That starts with testing — an area where El Paso County excels. The gold standard for testing capacity is set at 152 tests per day per 100,000 people. We very nearly meet that standard in El Paso County right now and we are working to increase our capacity. We are now seeing results for tests in our area in 24 to 48 hours.

We will continue to monitor for, and work to contain, outbreaks as we recover and rebuild our economy. Two of our best tools for doing this are widespread testing and contact tracing. El Paso County Public Health has increased staffing to greatly expand our capacity to monitor COVID-19 through contact tracing, which helps mitigate outbreaks and results in lives saved. Combined with your efforts to wear masks, wash your hands, and practice physical distancing, this work will help us keep COVID-19 contained.

As we move forward, there are also very important questions that we will work diligently to answer:

- Is there a "COVID-19 season," just as there is a cold and flu season? If so, will we see fewer infections in summer, but an increase in cases come fall and winter? How should we prepare for such a season and what types of interventions might prevent a large-scale outbreak in our community later this year?
- Why do some people become very sick, or even die, from COVID-19, while others are asymptomatic or have only a very mild illness?
- How long before symptoms start, and how long after they start to recede are people contagious?
- How long and strong is immunity once a person recovers from COVID-19? Do we develop long-term immunity, like we do with the measles? Or are we vulnerable to catching COVID-19 repeatedly, as we are with the coronaviruses that cause the common cold?
- Will COVID-19 mutate like the flu, changing enough that our immune systems don't recognize it and are vulnerable to catching it again?

It's taken a lot of hard work and dedication on the part of our outstanding community and our healthcare professionals to get to where we are today. I hope those of you who are able are visiting our local businesses, getting a haircut, going to the dentist, and catching up with loved ones — while maintaining physical distance and wearing a mask. I also hope that you will continue to see this community as a team, one that sticks together when the going gets tough and fights to protect its teammates.

Please know that all of us in public health have your back. We have been fighting every day, and we will continue that fight as we seek to answer the hard questions and come up with solutions that will allow us to move into a bright and healthy future.

