

Mass Testing for Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Long Term Care & Assisted Living Facilities

Long-term care (LTC) populations, including those in skilled nursing and assisted living, are at high risk for infection, serious illness, and death from COVID-19. Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) testing is used to detect SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. This testing is a priority to help inform clinical care and infection prevention and control (IPC) practices in LTC facilities.

SARS-CoV-2 testing can help facility leaders assess the scope (e.g., presence in one or several units) and magnitude of outbreaks and guide additional prevention and control efforts designed to further limit transmission among LTC residents and staff. This document refers only to RT-PCR testing, which detects the nucleic acid from SARS-CoV-2 virus, not other antigen tests or antibody tests.

Testing is one component of a broad-based response strategy that includes triage and clinical consultation, IPC measures, resident and staff health screening, exclusion of ill staff, and planning for staffing surge capacity in case of staff shortages. All of these other considerations must be in place for effectively applying testing to reduce transmission.

Mass Testing for COVID-19 Key Points

- Testing is used to inform specific IPC actions, such as determining infection burden across different units, cohorting residents, identifying positive staff for work exclusion, and enabling staff to return after infection.
- A negative RT-PCR test only indicates that an individual did not have detectable virus material present at the time of testing, and repeat testing might be needed. Widespread community transmission and movement of staff and residents in and out of a facility result in a continuous risk of introduction.
- Testing complements existing IPC interventions but does not replace good IPC.
- Preparations should be made for the potential impact on staffing levels, need for enhanced IPC strategies, including cohorting, and communication with residents, families, and staff.

Steps

1. Ensure your facility has appropriate quantity of PPE available to perform testing following CDC guidelines (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/infection-control-recommendations.html>).
 - a. PPE can be requested from the South Dakota Department of Health using the following link ([SD DOH PPE REQUEST](#))
2. Ensure employees fit tested for N95 respirators, or a higher level respirator are available to perform specimen collection at your facility.
 - a. Obtain fit testing for staff using your community resources (local hospital, hospital occupational health programs, EMS, Fire Department, etc).

- b. If fit testing is not available from community resources, e-mail: DOHSafety@state.sd.us with your fit testing request. The SD DOH will make every attempt to facilitate request.
 - c. Facilities that do not have N-95 respirators or fit-tested employees may attempt to obtain/borrow powered air-purifying respirators (PAPRs) to use for the testing event from a local healthcare partner.
 - d. If reusable respirators (e.g., powered air-purifying respirators [PAPRs]) are used, they must be cleaned and disinfected according to manufacturer's reprocessing instructions prior to re-use.
3. Assess the number of residents and healthcare personnel (HCP) in your facility. HCP include, but are not limited to, emergency medical service personnel, nurses, nursing assistants, physicians, technicians, therapists, phlebotomists, pharmacists, students and trainees, contractual staff not employed by the healthcare facility, and persons not directly involved in patient care but who could be exposed to infectious agents that can be transmitted in the healthcare setting (e.g., clerical, dietary, environmental services, laundry, security, engineering and facilities management, administrative, billing, and volunteer personnel).
 - a. Plan for 1 test per resident and HCP in the facility
4. Identify the laboratory that will be performing this mass testing event
 - a. Facilities should consult with the laboratory they are using for testing for guidance on what swabs the laboratory is validated to test (Nasopharyngeal (NP) or nasal).
 - b. Obtain collection, shipping supplies, and laboratory requisitions from laboratory
 - c. Consult with the laboratory to identify specimen collection and shipping requirements, as well as proper documentation.
 - d. If your facility does not have an identified laboratory that can conduct the mass specimen testing, LabCorp commercial laboratory is available. If you use LabCorp they will provide sampling materials and instructions for return of the specimen for processing. In addition, the South Dakota Public Health Laboratory will provide additional information on how to use LabCorp for mass testing.
5. Orders for testing will have to come from the facility medical director, or a patient's physician. Standing orders, or individual orders will be appropriate.
6. Collect swabs for SARS-CoV-2 following the appropriate laboratory and CDC Infection Control Guidance, as well as in consultation with your facility or system level infection control staff.
 - a. [Interim Guidelines for Collecting, Handling, and Testing Clinical Specimens from Persons for Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
 - b. [Interim Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Patients with Suspected or Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) in Healthcare Settings](#)
 - c. [Using Personal Protective Equipment \(PPE\)](#)
 - d. [Specimen collection instructional video \(NETEC\)](#)
 - e. [Specimen collection infographic \(NETEC\)](#)

7. Send specimens to the laboratory conducting testing for your facility following all shipping and handling requirements.
 - a. If you need assistance, contact your identified laboratory or the South Dakota Public Health Laboratory
8. South Dakota Department of Health is available to provide support and consultation during this process.

Frequently Asked Questions

Current data shows older adults and those living in congregate environments such as nursing homes and assisted living centers are some of the most vulnerable population for severe disease from COVID-19.

Wide scale testing of at-risk populations is one of the most important initiatives to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. In an effort consistent with national strategy of focused increased testing, the South Dakota Department of Health, in partnership with the health care community across South Dakota, will implement the plan for testing. This initiative will move at a tiered approach beginning with the nursing homes in communities with substantial community spread of COVID-19.

1. **Is mass testing mandatory?** The Department of Health would like to work in partnership with long-term care facilities and health care systems across South Dakota for this mass testing initiative. The Department of Health is requiring all licensed nursing home and assisted living centers to participate in this initiative. Facilities should use their internal policies to educate and document any resident or staff refusing testing.
2. **Do I need a medical order?** Yes, a medical order (individual or standing) is required.
3. **Is a consent form required?** Yes, consent is required for all residents, or their authorized representative, and staff tested.
4. **Who is going to collect the specimens?** Specimen collection should be performed by facility staff. Nursing homes and assisted living centers should work in partnership with a provider, local hospital or clinic to assist with the collection of specimens if needed.

- 5. Where do I get lab supplies?** Lab supplies should be requested from the laboratory conducting the testing. Order the supplies using the established process you have with your lab. Some labs provide the sampling materials directly as part of the cost of processing the test.

- 6. How do I order PPE?** If you are unable to order supplies through your normal supply system, you may request PPE from the Department of Health using the PPE request form. Request forms should be emailed to COVIDResourceRequests@state.sd.us, **faxed to 605.773.5942**, or called in to **605.773.3048** to ensure prioritization and coordination of requests. Please indicate the supplies are for the Mass Testing Initiative.

- 7. How can I get staff fit-tested?** Staff must be fit-tested prior to wearing a N-95 respirator. If you need staff fit-tested, contact your health care system or local hospital. If you are unable to have staff fit-tested, facilities may choose to contact their local healthcare partners (acute care hospital, EMS, etc) to inquire about borrowing a Powered Air Purifier Respirator (PAPR) short term for the testing event. Staff training is required for use of any PPE.

- 8. How is testing being paid for?** Federal funds are available through the state to pay for the processing of the specimen, laboratory supplies, and PPE. The facility is responsible for collecting the specimens.

- 9. How can I get payment for collecting specimens?** Reimbursement of specimen collection may be billed to Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance.

- 10. Do independent living centers need to be tested too?** Mass testing is focusing initially on nursing homes and assisted living centers. If the facility would like to include their independent living residents, they will need to determine if they have the capabilities and capacity to test this extra population during this initial testing event.