

Adam Crum
Commissioner

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PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Clinton Bennett, DHSS, 907-269-4996, clinton.bennett@alaska.gov

Case surges create data backlog; public health officials are asking Alaskans to help

Nov. 23, 2020 ANCHORAGE — The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) cautions that the surge in COVID-19 cases has strained the public health response, creating a backlog in case and contact investigations. **DHSS is urging anyone who receives a positive test result to notify their own close contacts as soon as possible so individuals can quarantine without delay.**

Across the nation, states are facing challenges in contact tracing and in efforts to reduce spread of the disease. Discussions are underway to consider the most effective strategies for tracking and mitigating the pandemic. Contact tracing remains a top priority for DHSS, but because of high case volume, public health officials are asking for the community's help.

"We remain committed to doing everything we can to fight this pandemic," said DHSS Commissioner Adam Crum. "This includes contact tracing, providing affordable and accessible testing, securing and shipping supplies to communities, supporting our health care partners and increasing mental health support. However, we're at a point in this pandemic when we truly need everyone's help. We're urging Alaskans to reduce risks and take action to protect themselves, their loved ones and our communities."

Individuals who test positive can find information to help them effectively isolate on the DHSS COVID-19 webpage. Alaskans who need food, housing or other non-medical assistance to effectively isolate or quarantine can contact Alaska 2-1-1 (dial 211 or 800-478-2221), their local Public Health Center or emergency operations center. They will be connected to agencies and resources in their community that can help.

"We acknowledge that what we're asking may be very difficult," said Alaska's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Anne Zink. "Remember anyone can get COVID. There should be no stigma associated with this highly infectious disease. If you are identified as a close contact, please quarantine immediately and remain in quarantine for a full 14 days. And if you need help, please ask for support."

"With the latest surge in cases, the state's contact tracers have been forced to triage cases to ensure they are reaching the people most at risk for severe symptoms and those most likely to spread the disease," said State Epidemiologist Dr. Joe McLaughlin. "Even with additional staffing, multiple systems are unable to keep up with reporting, data entry and outreach to all infected individuals. For newly reported cases, contact tracers try to make first contact the day the cases are reported, as well as provide monitoring calls to some of the highest risk individuals. However, due to the delays in the process and some calls that can't be initiated that first day, we recommend Alaskans call their own close contacts."

Public health contact tracers are prioritizing who needs to be called first based on factors recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Protection including how long ago the person was tested, if the person lives or works in a location where there is a high risk of transmission (for example, a nursing home), or if the person is at higher risk for severe illness based on age or other factors.

It is likely that some individuals will not be contacted. To help fill this gap, health care providers and testing facilities are being asked to educate patients about actions they should take while waiting for their test result and if they test positive.

What Alaskans can do to help stop the spread of COVID-19

- **Get tested** if you have any symptoms, even mild symptoms. Have a low threshold for testing.
- **While you're waiting for a test result**, STAY HOME and monitor your health for fever, cough, shortness of breath, loss of taste or sense of smell or other symptoms. As much as possible, stay away from others in your household. Many people may never experience symptoms but can still spread the infection to others who may become much sicker. Create a list of your recent close contacts so you can notify them immediately if you test positive.
- **If you test positive for COVID-19**,
 - *Isolate immediately.* Stay home except to get medical care and minimize contact with everyone in your household. Refer to the [“What to do after you test” handout](#) for specific directions on what to do.
 - *Notify close contacts.* Quickly notify anyone who has spent more than 15 minutes (cumulative) within six feet of you over a 24-hour period so they quarantine immediately. Provide them with this [handout](#) on what to do during quarantine.
 - *Seek care if needed.* Stay in touch with your doctor and seek care if you have any emergency warning signs or you think it's an emergency.
 - *Answer the call:* If you receive a phone call from a contact tracer, please answer the call and return their message. Many different entities are assisting with contact tracing so there is no caller ID. They will always tell you who they are, who they work for, and that they are calling about COVID-19. They never ask for money, your bank, credit card, social security number or immigration status. If you speak a language other than English, interpreters and interviewers who speak your language are available.
- **If you are a close contact**, quarantine immediately and for the full 14 days. Get tested around day 7 of your quarantine, even if you don't have symptoms. If the test is negative, STAY in quarantine. If the test is positive, isolate for 10 days and notify your close contacts.
- **Practice prevention and reduce risks.** Follow the 3 W's (wear a mask, wash hands frequently and watch your space by maintaining at least 6 feet from non-household members) and avoid the 3 C's (closed spaces, crowded places and close contact situations).
- **If you need mental health support**,
 - Careline Alaska: 877-266-4357, free, confidential help for anyone who needs to talk
 - National Disaster Distress Helpline: 800-985-5990. Immediate crisis counseling for people affected by COVID-19

- Alaska Responders Relief Line: 844-985-8275. Support for medical workers on the front lines of COVID-19 and their families.

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