

***This is an evolving situation, and the information below continues to be updated.***

(The last update was March 10, 2020 at 11:00 pm)

### **What are coronaviruses?**

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses, some causing illness in people and others that circulate among animals, including camels, cats and bats. Rarely, animal coronaviruses can evolve and infect people and then spread between people such as has been seen with recent outbreaks of MERS and SARS.

### **Are there any confirmed cases in Louisiana?**

As of 3/10/20, there are six presumptive positive cases in Louisiana, all from the greater New Orleans area.

### **What is the current situation?**

While the CDC now expects community spread in some parts of the United States, the immediate threat to the U.S. remains low. We are not seeing the same level of spread other countries are seeing. That said, it is important to be prepared. The Louisiana Department of Health has been preparing for COVID-19 since the outbreak in mainland China.

Additionally, the Office of Public Health has activated its Emergency Operations Center and has started using public health measures as part of an aggressive public health response strategy. This is the same strategy being done at the national level under the guidance of the CDC, and in all other states and the District of Columbia.

The Office of Public Health has developed guidance for clinicians for testing and treatment of COVID-19, as well as developed guidance for home care of patients with coronavirus. This guidance is given to all health care providers via our Health Alert Network.

### **What is Louisiana's testing capability?**

Louisiana currently has the capacity for several hundred tests. Currently, these tests are coming to the Office of Public Health from provider referrals, and are being accepted based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. Commercial testing is now also available, and any private lab tests that come back positive will be verified at the OPH lab in Baton Rouge and confirmed by the CDC lab in Atlanta. Health care providers can call the Office of Public Health Division's Infectious Disease Epidemiology Program (IDepi) 24-7 hotline with further questions about testing.

### **What is the total number of tests for COVID-19 of Persons Under Investigation (PUI)? What percentage have been positive?**

As of March 10, 2020, we have completed 43 tests, six of which have turned out positive. We learned about our first presumptive positive test on March 9. We are awaiting testing from the CDC to confirm each result.

**What are the symptoms of COVID-19?**

For confirmed coronavirus infections, reported illnesses have ranged from infected people with little to no symptoms (similar to the common cold) to people being severely ill and dying. Symptoms can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath/difficulty breathing

**Is there a vaccine for COVID-19?**

No. There is no specific antiviral treatment recommended for this infection. People infected with COVID-19 receive supportive care to help relieve symptoms.

**How does COVID-19 spread?**

Health experts are still learning the details about how this new coronavirus spreads. Other coronaviruses spread from an infected person to others through:

- Respiratory droplets produced when coughing and sneezing
- Close personal contact
- Touching an object or surface with the virus on it, then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes

**How can I help protect myself?**

The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to this virus. There are simple everyday preventive actions to help prevent the spread of respiratory viruses. These include:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

**Should I be tested for COVID-19?**

If you develop a fever and symptoms of respiratory illness, such as cough or shortness of breath, within 14 days after travel from China, Italy, Iran, South Korea and Japan, or you are a health care provider caring for someone with respiratory illness who tests negative for flu or other respiratory illnesses, you should call ahead to a healthcare professional and mention your recent travel or close contact. In addition, someone with a respiratory illness not confirmed to be flu or another respiratory illness should ask their provider about being tested for coronavirus.

If you have had close contact with someone showing these symptoms who has recently traveled from this area, you should call ahead to a healthcare professional and mention your close contact and their recent travel.

**How does COVID-19 compare to influenza in terms of symptoms, mortality rate, number of cases, etc.?**

Much is unknown about COVID-19 in terms of how easily it spreads, who is most at risk, and how serious it is going to be. From preliminary studies, COVID-19 tends to be more severe in people over age 60, and those that have underlying medical conditions. Those most at risk are those over age 60 who have

underlying medical conditions. It is safe to say, given the limited scientific information we have at this point, that it is at least as severe, if not more serious than the seasonal flu.

**What is the protocol in place for responding to a pandemic like Coronavirus/COVID-19?**

COVID-19 behaves in many ways similar to influenza. Because of this, the CDC recommends using the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness plan as our model for the response. The Louisiana Department of Health has been working on our Pandemic Preparedness Plan for the last 15 years, and we have been preparing for COVID-19 starting in early January 2020. In early March, the Governor directed the formation of a COVID-19 Task Force with representation from state agencies and federal partners key to preparing for a COVID-19 outbreak. This task force guides updating Louisiana's pandemic flu/COVID-19 response and ensures a continuity of operations and advises the Unified Command Group.

**What have you been doing as far as monitoring people who may have been exposed?**

Our first priority was to monitor any travelers who returned to Louisiana from visiting China's areas that had the most community spread. As other countries experienced community spread, Louisiana epidemiologists have been in contact with travelers who returned from traveling abroad to high-exposure countries to ask whether they were experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. We touch base with those travelers each day and ask about their symptoms during a 14-day period of observation. We are also ensuring that travelers know the destinations where non-essential travel should be avoided. The countries under a Level 3 Travel Notice are China, Iran, Italy and South Korea.

**Will the State identify COVID-19 patients?**

Because of patient privacy laws, the Louisiana Department of Health cannot provide any information that might identify patients. This includes name, residence of patient, place of treatment or any other potentially identifying patient information.

**What's the next major step in the Department's plan for responding to an outbreak?**

Mirroring the federal government's response, we are moving from a 'containment' approach in which we focused on travelers to a 'mitigation' approach in which we anticipate and plan for person-to-person transmission in the community somewhere in the United States. We are focused on state and local government preparedness and are providing support to health care providers, schools, businesses and community members to ensure they are adequately prepared to take action to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

**What factors would trigger a government-mandated closure of schools or businesses, etc.?**

Where there has been a student in a school with COVID-19, the Office of Public Health would consider steps to close and clean that school. However, this would be triggered first by action from the school. Specifically, the circumstance(s) that would prompt the Office of Public Health to suggest school closures would be first, when it has been confirmed that children within the school are actively transmitting an infection at the school, causing an outbreak and significant disruption. Secondly, we might consider the suggestion if a significant number of students or faculty were out, and normal school activities simply could not continue. In any of these circumstances, we would suggest a thorough school cleaning.

**What precautions is the State taking to protect our students and school system staff and parent volunteers from possible exposure to the COVID-19?**

The Louisiana Office of Public Health (OPH) has been in contact with the Louisiana Department of Education (DOE) in regard to disease control and prevention of COVID-19. OPH has provided guidance from the CDC on infection control best practices such as handwashing, covering of coughs, disinfection of environmental surfaces, and encouraging students and staff to stay home when they are ill. Further guidance has been shared on social distancing, cancellation of classes and school events, as well as discouraging social gatherings among students in the event that there is community (person-to-person) transmission of the disease.

These activities build on relationships and common practices established with the Department of Education during the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic and the 2015 Ebola response. OPH has offered assistance and advice to both state and local school systems in preparing for and responding to COVID-19 in Louisiana.

**What should I do if I have recently traveled?**

Anyone who recently traveled to China, South Korea, Iran, Italy, or Japan within the previous 14 days, who experiences fever, cough, or other acute illness should contact a health care provider as soon as possible and mention your recent travel. Please call ahead and inform the health care provider about your travel history.

**What are you doing to make sure hospitals are prepared?**

LDH has been working with the Louisiana Hospital Association (LHA) and the ESF8 Network to prepare hospitals for an outbreak and ensure they have the proper supplies needed as well as protocols in place for anyone treated who tests positive. We haven't had any indication that hospitals don't have what they need on the supply side.

**How does the process for testing for COVID-19 work?**

The Office of Public Health operates an advanced laboratory in Baton Rouge that performs many types of tests for infectious diseases, such as for tuberculosis and measles. Our state lab workers are a team of highly trained professionals who are experienced at testing for many kinds of infectious diseases using a variety of different tests. When a test of an infectious disease of any kind is performed at the State Lab, they are on samples that are brought to the lab via a courier.

**Is there a cost associated with testing for COVID-19?**

The tests that the federal government has provided the Office of Public Health have not been associated with any payments. Commercial tests are covered under Medicaid and Medicare as an essential health benefit. The cost for a test under private health insurance providers may vary.

**Are there additional costs for responding to COVID-19 outside of testing?**

The Department anticipates hiring additional epidemiologists and lab staffing, increasing call center capacity, increasing lab training and developing educational content under the federal budget appropriations that have been set aside for COVID-19 response.

**Is the Louisiana Department of Health concerned about shipping channels such as the Port of New Orleans being affected by COVID-19?**

Department officials met with the Coast Guard to discuss potential issues with the COVID-19 virus once it became more clear that the virus was spreading globally. We don't think there will be potential for spreading the virus through shipping channels.

**So is it safe to receive a package from any area where COVID-19 has been reported?**

Yes. The likelihood of an infected person contaminating commercial goods is low and the risk of catching the virus that causes COVID-19 from a package that has been moved, traveled, and exposed to different conditions and temperature is also low.

**Are you in regular contact with the federal government?**

Yes. We are in constant contact with the CDC and HHS; we're currently averaging several calls per week just with the CDC. In addition we have standing calls across state health departments and a standing call internally in Louisiana. This is all very important so that we all have the latest data, are on the same page, and can adapt our plans as conditions change.

**Should families have a plan if an outbreak occurs?**

The best preparation families can do is practice good seasonal flu/cold hygiene: cover your cough, wash your hands (especially after being in public spaces, shaking hands), stay home if you are sick, and get your flu shot! Families should also monitor the [CDC COVID-19 website](#) for updated travel advisories before making plans to travel internationally.

**Is there a special information phone number for people to call?**

Yes, individuals with questions can call our COVID-19 General Information Line at 1-855-523-2652 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

**Should I keep my children home from school or avoid going to work?**

There are a limited number of schools and workplaces that are closed in the U.S. You should follow guidance from your specific school district and employer about closures. At this time, it is not necessary to keep children home from school or avoid going to work unless told to do so by local officials.

**Should I cancel my travel plans?**

The CDC is not recommending that travelers cancel all plans except to specific locations where the threat of COVID-19 spread is significantly higher. If you have a trip planned, [check the CDC's site](#) for a risk assessment of your destination. If you travel, take the same precautions you would while home to avoid getting sick or spreading germs including washing your hands thoroughly and often and avoiding contact with sick people.