Testing is a vital step towards reducing the spread of COVID-19

There is still much we don't know about SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the disease we've all come to know as COVID-19. But what healthcare and government officials have learned for sure – we can all help the region contain the spread of COVID-19 by getting tested and following a few simple steps: wear a mask over your mouth and nose, wash your hands frequently, avoid large indoor gatherings, and maintain physical distance from one another.

Recently, the National Institute of Health (NIH) laid out three reasons that testing is so crucial: Testing saves lives; Testing can be quick and easy; and Testing matters more in communities like El Paso. According to the NIH, "Testing of all people for SARS-CoV-2, including those who have no symptoms, (those) who show symptoms … and (those) who may have been exposed to the virus will help prevent the spread of COVID-19 by identifying people who are in need of care in a timely fashion."

As we've seen, COVID-19 can spread quickly in a community such as ours and that may be partially attributable to confusion about when to get tested. To be clear, anyone showing symptoms such as trouble breathing, fever, sore throat or loss of sense of smell and taste should be tested immediately. Likewise, anyone who may have been exposed to the virus should also be tested to help prevent further spread.

Additionally, it's important to understand the type of test you're taking.

A molecular test, like those given at many of the public testing sites, are the most accurate and tells you whether you are infected at the time, unfortunately, results take few days. Antigen tests, often marketed as rapid tests, checks to see if you have the infection at the time of the test but it is not as accurate as the molecular test and may miss some infections. Antibody tests can tell you if you have produced specific antibodies that indicates you previously had the virus.

According to the CDC, if you test negative, it's only a snapshot of the moment in time at which you got tested and doesn't mean you should let your guard down. While testing allows people to self-isolate, households to quarantine and individuals to seek treatment more effectively, none of the tests which are presently available are 100 percent accurate.

El Paso city and county officials recognize that testing as many people as possible is one of the keys to control the spread of COVID-19, by identifying as many people as possible that are infected to place under isolation or quarantine. As the number of cases in El Paso County increased at an exponential rate over the last several weeks, health officials had a hard time keeping up with the need to collect and process tests and supply of tests was limited. However, capacity and supply have now increased dramatically and up to ten thousand people can be tested daily.

"In the next few months, more will change as the first wave of vaccines are made available," said El Paso County Commissioner David Stout. "However, while this provides us with an optimistic look ahead, it's important we contain the virus now before flu season peaks in the Borderland – which generally happens in late-December to January."

For a complete list of testing sites and a link to schedule an appointment at one of the drive-thru testing sites, visit reducetherisk915.org. While you're there, you can also get valuable information on how to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 in our community.