



JOINT NEWS RELEASE

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Correction: Statement regarding negative test results has been corrected; see full text below.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Berrien County Announces Expanded Capability for COVID-19 Testing

More resources and revised state guidelines allow for more individuals to be tested

Berrien County, Mich. – New COVID-19 testing equipment, additional supplies, and expanded testing criteria in the state are making it possible for more people in Southwest Michigan to be tested for the virus. Due to the enhanced testing capacity, people who previously wouldn't qualify for testing may now be tested for COVID-19. Specimen collection sites in Berrien County are available at the Spectrum Health Lakeland Center for Outpatient Services, located at 3900 Hollywood Road in St. Joseph and at InterCare Community Health Network, located at 800 M-139 in Benton Harbor. InterCare also has a mobile testing unit which travels throughout Berrien County.

Until recently, testing was reserved for people showing severe symptoms, healthcare employees with symptoms, hospital inpatients with suspected COVID-19, and other high-risk patients. Now, Spectrum Health Lakeland and InterCare Community Health Network can test patients with mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms, as the supply of specimen collection kits and testing equipment allow.

Currently, a medical provider screens all patients to determine whether they should be tested for COVID-19 based on symptoms and exposure history to a person with COVID-19. Testing at both sites still requires a provider order as rapid testing is not yet widely available. Specimens from Lakeland are tested at the Spectrum Health Regional Lab in Grand Rapids, which typically produces results in less than 24 hours. InterCare is partnering with NxGen Laboratories in Grand Rapids to provide testing results. Between the two sites there is ability to perform several hundred tests each day. This continues to be a dynamic situation, however, and the evolving testing strategy is assessed on a regular basis.

“We understand the important role testing plays in limiting the spread of this disease in our communities,” said Joe Brown, director, laboratory services, Spectrum Health Lakeland. “Our goal has always been to test as many people as possible but, like so many other health systems nationwide, we’ve been limited by our resources. With these additional testing supplies, we can begin to meet the demand for testing in our region.”

“At InterCare, we recognize that the risk of this virus is not the same for everyone. People in certain racial, ethnic, and low income groups are at a higher risk for contracting COVID-19 and experiencing severe symptoms - especially if they don’t have access to the testing needed for diagnosis,” said Velma Hendershott, President & CEO of InterCare Community Health Network. “We are pleased to be able to provide COVID-19 testing in Berrien County as a way to continue our mission of ensuring equal access to preventive health services, particularly those with higher vulnerabilities to this pandemic.”

“The increase in testing capacity is crucial for the success of ongoing contact tracing efforts in Berrien County to identify COVID-19 cases early and subsequently test the symptomatic close personal contacts of the confirmed individuals,” says Nicki Britten, health officer, Berrien County Health Department. Britten warns, however, that while capacity for testing has been expanded, the resources are not unlimited. “Curiosity is not a valid reason to test someone for COVID-19, and timing of testing is a significant factor doctors take under consideration when ordering testing.” It can take between four and five days after COVID-19 exposure for the viral amplification process to occur in a person’s body so that enough virus is present to be detected through a nasal swab test. **A negative test result shows that there was not a detectable COVID-19 viral load present at the time of testing; individuals with a negative test result could be in the early stages of infection and could later become symptomatic and contagious with the virus.**

With new equipment, Spectrum Health Lakeland can also produce more rapid results for hospitalized patients with severe disease or for those scheduled for inpatient surgical procedures. A key benefit of quicker results is less time spent in isolation waiting for results for patients who eventually turn out to be negative for the virus that causes COVID-19. Another is the reduction in need for personal protective equipment (PPE), which continues to be in short supply.

Since testing began locally on April 9, Spectrum Health Lakeland has tested more than 1,950 individuals. InterCare Community Health Network began testing on April 13th and to date have since tested nearly 450 patients in Southwest Michigan.

People experiencing symptoms should call their primary care provider or either the Spectrum Health hotline at 833.559.0659 or InterCare hotline at 855.869.6900 to be scheduled for a free virtual screening. Anyone with severe or life-threatening symptoms should call 9-1-1.

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