

## **COVID-19 is still out there. Get tested, work with contact tracers, save a life**

*By Commissioner Judith Persichilli, New Jersey Department of Health*

As summer approaches and New Jersey continues to gradually reopen based on improving data, it may be tempting for residents to resume life as if COVID-19 never happened.

But the pandemic is not over. Despite the number of cases falling, the virus is still circulating. Many of those who have tested positive for COVID-19 have not exhibited any symptoms. The best way to stop its spread and prevent the resurgence we've seen in other states that have reopened their economies is through robust testing and contact tracing.

New Jersey recently passed the 1 million mark in diagnostic tests performed in the state. We need to continue this trend to slow the transmission of the virus. Testing is vital to identify positive cases quickly, trace contacts and encourage them to get tested, self-isolate and monitor for symptoms.

Since the pandemic began, the Murphy Administration has worked aggressively to ramp up testing. Today, testing is available for all residents who want it or need it. There are more than 250 testing sites.

As the outbreak spread, it further exposed and underscored long-standing health and economic inequalities in our nation and state. Residents of communities of color have been disproportionately impacted due to barriers in health care and testing, as well as having a higher prevalence of underlying medical conditions that increase their risk for serious complications and death.

To help reach underserved populations and urban areas, we are working to offer greater access to testing through mobile and walk-up sites in partnership with local public health departments, community and faith leaders, and the private sector.

It's especially important to get tested if you:

- Are experiencing symptoms including fever, cough, shortness of breath, chills, sore throat, muscle pain, shivering, headache, or new loss of taste or smell.
- Have been in close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19
- Are an essential worker (health care professional, transit worker, first responder or food service worker).
- You have participated in a large gathering—like a demonstration or march—where you may not have been able to maintain social distancing.

Along with testing, it is also important to track the virus once someone tests positive.

New Jersey's local and county health departments are at the center of our contact tracing efforts, with some 800 contact tracers already on the job. To boost their ranks, the state is working with the Rutgers School of Public Health to develop a contact tracing curriculum that will help us to recruit, train and deploy 1,600 additional tracers by the end of June.

Contact tracers will only call if you have tested positive for COVID-19 or because you may have come in close contact with someone else who did. It's critical that you answer the call and provide important information that will help you and help to prevent further disease transmission in your community.

Trained contact tracers will provide information on how you can protect those around you from getting sick, such as isolating yourself. They will tell you about available community supports such as job protection measures, pandemic unemployment benefits, child care resources and food assistance through NJ SNAP and WIC. If necessary, they will be able to link you to services to support you during your self-isolation period.

Any information collected through contact tracing will be kept confidential. The contact tracer will not reveal your name or COVID-19 status to your contacts – that information will only be provided to public health officials. They will never ask for your social security number, financial information or immigration status. Your cell phone or GPS location won't be tracked, and the confidential

information you provide will never be shared with immigration or law enforcement.

New Jersey is a very diverse state. We are working to ensure that as many of these new contact tracers as possible come from and reflect the diversity of the communities they will be working in. We expect that they will be able to effectively communicate and engage with individuals who speak other languages and have diverse cultures.

In order to be successful, we need to ensure residents are familiar with and trust the process. We have been reaching out to public health officers, community and interfaith leaders and elected officials so they educate their residents on these public health tools.

These efforts will help us build a stronger and safer New Jersey, and for us to be successful, we are counting on everyone to participate and cooperate.

Do your part: Get tested to ensure your health and safety and that of your loved ones. And if a contact tracer telephones you, take the call. You can save a life.

Visit [COVID19.nj.gov/testing](https://COVID19.nj.gov/testing) to find a site or talk to your doctor, local pharmacist or community health clinic. If you are uninsured, call 211 to locate a free COVID-19 testing site.

Judith Persichilli is Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Health.