



COVID-19 FAQ

Sorting through the various news sources regarding the coronavirus pandemic and the local response to it is nearly a full-time job. It is hard to keep up! We wanted to reach out to you, to provide you with an update from your healthcare provider, about services at WCHC and with some recent information about the intersection of HIV and COVID-19. Thanks to the members of WCHC's Consumer Advisory Board for their input and helpful suggestions.

1. What services are being offered at WCHC?

We are offering tele-health and limited in-person visits. Telehealth visits can be via video or on the telephone. You do need to be signed up on the Patient Portal in order to take advantage of the video visit option, but nothing other than a telephone is required for the phone visits. Please call your primary care site if you want to make an appointment, want to sign up for the Portal, or just to ask questions. Because of the limited amount of in-person appointments, you may be offered an appointment at a site other than your usual primary care site. The in-person appointments are limited because we are taking every precaution to keep our patients and our staff safe. Right now that means allowing only one patient in the Health Center at a time, one medical provider, and very limited support staff.

2. What if I don't have the technology at home for tele-health (video) visit?

All that's needed for most people is a telephone, of any kind. It does not need to be a cell phone, or a "smart phone." However, if you would like to have a video visit with your provider, you will need either a computer, a tablet, or a smart phone, and you will need to be signed up on the Patient Portal. If you need assistance with this, please talk to your Care Team, we may be able to help.

3. What should I do if I think I need a COVID-19 test?

Please call your primary care medical site and schedule a tele-health appointment. During that appointment, you will be asked about your symptoms and the concerns you have about needing the COVID-19 test. If your need is immediate, you will be able to talk to a nurse right away about your symptoms, so that a decision can be made about whether you need care right away or can wait a day or two for a test. West County Health Centers is offering regular testing, in Sebastopol and Guerneville. The testing is by appointment only.

Sonoma County's Department of Public Health has partnered with OptumServe to provide testing, also by appointment, in Santa Rosa. Currently, the testing location is at the Santa Rosa Fairgrounds. Go to <https://socoemergency.org/emergency/novel-coronavirus/stay-healthy/covid-19-testing-in-sonoma-county/> or call 1 (888) 634-1123 to find out more.



4. What does WCHC do if I test positive?

You will have a follow up phone appointment for your test results. We will check on your symptoms and decide if you are able to stay home and care for yourself, if you need to be placed at an alternative care site or if you need care at a hospital.

5. Can I get tested for COVID-19 without symptoms?

There are some good reasons to get a COVID-19 test even if you feel fine and don't think you have the infection. The more we know about the level of active COVID-19 in our community, the better we will understand the spread of the infection. However, while we have adequate supplies of testing materials currently, we don't know how long that will be true. Right now we are trying to reserve our testing material for people who have concerning symptoms, or for people who are required to get the test (to get into housing, to see relatives in nursing homes, to get surgery, and so on). If you think you should get a test, you can call your primary care site and schedule a phone or tele-health visit to discuss whether or not testing is needed.

6. How does contact tracing work?

When someone tests positive for COVID-19, the Sonoma County Public Health Department becomes involved. The Public Health staff contact those who may have been exposed to the infected individual, without revealing the identity of the person who may have exposed them. Go to <https://socoemergency.org/ufaq/what-is-contact-tracing/> for more information.

7. Is it ok if I'm past due for my labs?

If you have been taking your HIV medication as prescribed, and your viral load has been undetectable for at least six months, and your T cells are at a stable level, then you can probably delay your usual blood tests. If you recently made a medication change, or you are newly diagnosed with HIV, or you have low or declining T cells, you should probably be getting your usual blood tests done instead of waiting. Please talk to your primary care provider to discuss what's best for you.

8. Is WCHC going to offer any COVID-19 prevention supplies to patients?

Yes, we have cloth masks for patients. We are also going to provide thermometers, cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, blood pressure cuffs and pulse oximeters to patients who need these types of supplies. Please reach out to your care team if you are in need. We think it's important for everyone to have the ability and resources to stay safe and to be able to monitor their own health at home, during a time when access to usual health facilities is more limited.



9. Does having HIV increase my risk for getting COVID-19?

There is no indication that being HIV-positive puts you at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 infection. There are clear risk factors for contracting the infection, such as not wearing a mask in public places, being in large groups of people, touching your face, and not washing your hands, but having HIV is not one of those risk factors.

10. If I do get COVID-19, will being HIV-positive make the infection more serious?

The answer to this is probably not. Unless you are not taking medications to manage your HIV infection, and your immune system is weakened, then you are probably not at greater risk. There have been several studies, enrolling very small numbers of people, that have shown conflicting results to this question, however. One study, from Italy, showed that those who were HIV+ and who were hospitalized for COVID-19 infection, were younger, on average, than those who were also hospitalized but were not co-infected with HIV. That study had only 47 people in it, though, so it is difficult to draw sweeping conclusions from their results. Another study, from New York, showed that among those hospitalized for COVID-19 infection, those who were HIV-positive were more likely to need admission to the ICU and more likely to need to be intubated. Again, a small study of only 63 people. On the other hand, another New York study of just under 500 people showed no difference in severity of illness or adverse outcomes from COVID-19 infection.

11. If I get COVID-19, will being HIV-positive protect me in some way?

Interestingly, there is some thought among researchers that tenofovir, the medication in Truvada and Descovy, which many HIV+ people take, may have a protective effect. This is not entirely clear, and the statement is being made more on a theoretical basis, rather than on the results of a clinical trial. In a similar way to how tenofovir inhibits the activity of HIV, it may inhibit replication of SARS-CoV-2, the active agent of COVID-19 infection. There is an ongoing study in Spain in which healthcare workers are being given Truvada to see if it reduces their susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 infection.

There is also some speculation that other HIV medications may have protective effects as well, but so far these have not been proven in clinical studies. There is also some thought that tenofovir, or HIV itself, might suppress the immune system response that results in a powerful inflammatory reaction against COVID-19, which some scientists think is the reason that some people get so severely ill.

12. What about the antibody test?

West County Health Centers is currently not recommending the antibody test for our patients. The available evidence tells us that the tests do not have sufficient accuracy or precision to tell us with certainty whether or not an individual has been infected with SARS-CoV-2 or with a different corona virus. It is also uncertain whether having the antibodies, if in fact they are SARS-CoV-2 antibodies, are fully protective. Lastly, the antibodies, as seen in animal models, do not appear to last for more than a few weeks. Therefore, the presence of antibodies may or may not be protective, and, if protective, may last for only a short time. In summary, the antibody test does not seem particularly helpful and could even result in a false sense of security. (Davey – 7.16.20)