Why CDC was right to revise coronavirus testing guidelines

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What’s the news: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has revised previously issued—and widely criticized—guidance on SARS-CoV-2 testing for asymptomatic patients exposed to COVID-19.

In August, SARS-CoV-2 testing guidance was posted on the CDC website that said: “If you have been in close contact (within 6 feet) of a person with a COVID-19 infection for at least 15 minutes but do not have symptoms, you do not necessarily need a test unless you are a vulnerable individual or your health care provider or state or local public health officials recommend you take one.”

Among those critical of the move was AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD.

“Months into this pandemic, we know COVID-19 is spread by asymptomatic people,” Dr. Bailey said at the time. “Suggesting that people without symptoms, who have known exposure to COVID-positive individuals, do not need testing is a recipe for community spread and more spikes in coronavirus.”

She urged the CDC and the Department of Health and Human Services “to release the scientific justification for this change in testing guidelines.”

Now the CDC webpage providing an overview on SARS-CoV-2 testing says: “Due to the significance of asymptomatic and presymptomatic transmission, this guidance further reinforces the need to test asymptomatic persons, including close contacts of a person with documented SARS-CoV-2 infection.”

Why it’s important: Given the shortage of key testing supplies that are expected to last for the rest of this year, the AMA has outlined priorities for physicians to consider when ordering polymerase chain reaction diagnostic tests for SARS-CoV-2.

To slow the spread of COVID-19, patients with a known exposure to SARS-CoV-2 are among the categories of patients with a “medically indicated need” that the AMA has said should get priority.
Others are patients who:

- Exhibit COVID-19 symptoms.
- Require a negative SARS-CoV-2 test to pursue medical treatment or procedures.
- Are health care workers.

This list, the AMA notes, “is not exhaustive and other individuals may have legitimate medically indicated needs for testing services.” Such requests “should be considered on a case-by-case basis.”

In addition, there is likely a need to test asymptomatic patients as part of public health surveillance efforts. Patients taking part in such efforts should be included as those with a prioritized need for testing services, the AMA says.

Read more about who should get priority amid SARS-CoV-2 testing shortages.

Learn more: Find out why patients should mask up to stop the spread of COVID-19. Physicians can track the pandemic with the AMA’s COVID-19 resource center, which offers a library of current resources from the JAMA Network™, the CDC and the World Health Organization.