The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting challenges to the world and our own St. Louis region that are likely to continue over the next weeks and months. Area physicians and health care leaders from BJC, Mercy and SSM Health are working together to help St. Louis face these challenges. We are working in close partnership with local and state health departments and our academic medical institutions, Saint Louis University and Washington University Schools of Medicine.

We are confident that with knowledge, vigilance and collaboration, the St. Louis community can weather the COVID-19 pandemic together.

BJC, Mercy and SSM Health are working together, following guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and Missouri and Illinois health departments, to ensure community members access to factual information and quality care connected to novel coronavirus, or COVID-19.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

About COVID-19

- Coronaviruses are a common family of viruses that can cause respiratory infections. There are several variations and are well-known to the medical community.
- Symptoms include fever, coughing, and difficulty breathing. (See “The symptoms” below.)
- COVID-19 is a new type of coronavirus first identified late last year. The symptoms and transmission are similar in many ways to influenza. Evidence has shown so far that in most cases COVID-19 causes mild to moderate respiratory illness.
- In some cases, especially for the elderly and those with chronic medical conditions, COVID-19 can be more harmful and require medical intervention.
- COVID-19 is spread from person to person by respiratory droplets, such as when someone who is sick coughs or sneezes. Symptoms of COVID-19 usually appear within five days after initial exposure to the virus.
- The WHO has declared COVID-19 a pandemic because it is a disease that has spread across a wide region, such as several continents, affecting a greater number of people than any previous virus.

The symptoms

- Symptoms of COVID-19 infection include fever, dry cough, fatigue, and difficulty breathing or shortness of breath.
- Some of these symptoms are similar to cold or flu symptoms. But runny noses and sinus pressure or stuffiness are not normal among the first symptoms.
- If you believe you have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 or believe you have been exposed to someone who is infected, contact your physician for guidance. If you’re having extreme difficulty breathing or feel your condition worsening, call the nearest emergency department or call 911. Please do not go to the emergency department just to request a screening. The health department has established a hotline to answer questions about screening.

Merck will open a community testing site in Chesterfield to test patients suspected of COVID-19 for suspected cases of COVID-19. As a hospital community, we expect to add additional community testing sites and will share information with the public as those sites become available.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Steps you should take

- Wash your hands frequently and effectively, especially after using the bathroom, blowing your nose or coughing, and before eating. This means using soap and water and scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds (about the time it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice).
- If soap and water aren’t available, use a hand sanitizer containing 60% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Avoid contact with others who are sick.
- Cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and immediately dispose of the tissue in your trash, or cough into your elbow.
- Be aware of any flu-like symptoms, including fever, chills, cough, sore throat, headache and body aches.
- Stay home if you’re sick. Going to work or attending social events while sick puts others people at risk.
- Unless you are sick or have been directed by your medical provider, it is not necessary to wear a mask to protect yourself.

Reducing your exposure

The chances of COVID-19 spreading are increased when large groups of people are in close, crowded contact with each other. As a result, communities are canceling parades, festivals, concerts and other events; colleges and universities are extending breaks or holding classes online; and sports leagues are suspending their seasons. You can reduce your chances of exposure by:

- Avoiding crowded places, especially if you are older or have an underlying health condition like diabetes, heart disease or COPD.
- Working at home if your employer allows.
- Traveling only when necessary for work or personal reasons.
- It is not necessary to stockpile food, hand sanitizer or other goods at home.

WHAT WE ARE DOING AT OUR HOSPITALS

- Screening at doctors’ offices and hospital entry points for clinical symptoms and travel history; screening criteria will continue to evolve with the CDC’s guidelines, and adapt to the spread of the virus.
- Following a process to identify patients suspected of infection and coordinating testing, when appropriate, with local or state health departments.
- Isolating patients suspected of infection and using CDC-recommended personal protective equipment to reduce the spread of infection.
- Managing personal protective equipment and supplies to ensure our caregivers have the equipment they need to safely provide care.

As health care leaders, we are working with a sense of calm: keeping on behalf of our patients, visitors and each other by working with our employees regarding travel restrictions and screening, canceling or postponing events, and encouraging team members to use technology to virtually attend meetings and coordinate their work in a way that allows them to continue their work in other parts of the country.

Together we can minimize the risk and keep the St. Louis area thriving in the face of this challenge.

Your cooperation matters.

In the words of WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “We’re in this together to do the right things with calm and protect the citizens of the world. It’s doable.”

For more information on COVID-19 and related issues, call:

Missouri Department of Health
877-435-8411

For additional information:
- www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/
- www.wa.gov/emergencies/diseases/hiv towing-coronavirus
- www.bjc.org/coronavirus
- www.who.int/covid19
- www.mercury.net/covid19
- www.ssmhealth.com

The St. Louis region will weather coronavirus by working together

Clay Dunagan, MD, MS
Senior Vice President and Chief Clinical Officer

Keith Starkes, MD
Senior Vice President and Chief Quality Officer

Alexander Garza, MD, MPH
Chief Medical Officer