

Houston pleads for more tests, gear as cars pack hospital

March 19 2020, by John L. Mone and Paul J. Weber



A person is taken on a stretcher into the United Memorial Medical Center after going through testing for COVID-19 Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. People were lined up in their cars in a line that stretched over two miles to be tested in the drive-thru testing for coronavirus. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

Cars lined up for more than a mile outside a Houston hospital Thursday as the nation's fourth-largest city began drive-thru testing for the coronavirus, but officials warned they don't have enough kits or protective gear to meet demand.

"I don't want to create false hope that we are ready right now to have a radical increase in testing," said Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, the top county official in Houston. "We are unfortunately not."

Hours after the drive-thru testing began, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott ordered schools closed for more than 5 million students and shuttered restaurant dining rooms. Texas has confirmed more than 140 cases and five deaths related to the virus that causes COVID-19. About 2,500 testing kits were available at the drive-thru at United Memorial Medical Center and only those showing symptoms would be screened for the virus, said U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee.

She said the hospital had administered fewer than 200 tests within the first six hours. The Democrat said the state is running out of [personal protective equipment](#) and that more is needed, but didn't say how long the existing supply would last.

"I am not happy with where we are in the nation," she said.

One of the first vehicles through was a red pickup truck containing a woman who could be heard loudly coughing. Health workers in blue [protective gear](#) removed her from the truck and put her on a stretcher, then wheeled her into a nearby tent.



A man tries to talk to officials while standing in front of a line of cars stretching over two-miles to enter drive-thru testing for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center, Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

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The vast majority of people recover from the virus. According to the

World Health Organization, people with mild cases recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe ones can take three to six weeks to recover.

Nationwide, public frustrations over the difficulties of getting tested for the new virus have been building since the first U.S. case was confirmed Jan. 20. Early missteps with [test](#) kits developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, coupled with strict government criteria about who qualified for screening, have led to widespread reports of people struggling to get tested.



Healthcare professionals prepare to begin testing at a drive-thru testing site for

COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Healthcare professionals prepare to begin testing at a drive-thru testing site for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



A patient is tested by a healthcare professional at a drive-thru testing site for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Healthcare professionals prepare to begin testing at a drive-thru testing site for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



A healthcare professional hands a checklist to a patient at a drive-thru testing site for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Healthcare professionals prepare to test a woman during drive thru testing for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. The woman was later placed on a stretcher and taken into the facility for treatment. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



A healthcare professional, left, asks a patient to lower their window during drive thru testing for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



Health care professionals prepare to open drive-thru testing for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



A line of cars stretching over two-miles wait to enter drive-thru testing for COVID-19 at United Memorial Medical Center, Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



A woman is taken on a stretcher by healthcare professionals into the United Memorial Medical Center after going through testing for COVID-19 Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. People were lined up in their cars in a line that stretched over two miles to be tested in the drive-thru testing for coronavirus. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

Texas health officials reported that the state had administered more than 2,300 tests as of Thursday. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott told mayors and county officials a week ago that the supply of tests exceeded demand, and on Thursday said the state will soon have the capacity to test around 15,000 people a week.

Abbott had lagged behind other governors nationwide in ordering school

and business closures, having until now left that decision to local health officials. That resulted in a patchwork of restrictions that had varied starkly even between big neighboring cities such as Dallas and Fort Worth, frustrating and confusing some local officials.

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