

California releases smartphone virus tool as cases soar

December 7 2020, by Amy Taxin and Adam Beam



Customers wait for their take out order at Fatburger in the Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles on Sunday Dec. 6, 2020. Many Californians were preparing Sunday for a new stay-at-home order that bars restaurant dining, shuts salons and limits retail in an effort to curb spiraling coronavirus infections and hospitalizations. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday announced a voluntary smartphone tool to alert people of possible coronavirus exposure as cases soar higher, new restrictions are imposed and many people still say they won't heed the pleas to stay home.

The tool—which has been used on a pilot basis on some state university campuses—doesn't track people's identities or locations but uses Bluetooth wireless signals to detect when two phones are within 6 feet (1.8 meters) of each other for at least 15 minutes, officials said.

California's 40 million residents can opt in to the system starting Thursday. When someone who has activated the technology tests positive for the virus, that person will receive a verification code from state health officials that can be used to send an anonymous alert to other users who may have been exposed over the past 14 days.

"The more people that participate in it, the more that opt in, the more effective this program can be," Newsom told reporters. "We are hoping there will be enough to make this meaningful."

The technology comes as coronavirus cases are exploding in California and more than 80% of the state's residents are under orders not to leave their homes for at least the next three weeks except for essential purposes. Sixteen other states, plus Guam and Washington, D.C., have already made available the system co-created by Apple and Google, though most residents of those places aren't using it.



A take out customer is reflected in the window of Sharky's Woodfired Mexican Grill in the Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles on Sunday Dec. 6, 2020. Many Californians were preparing Sunday for a new stay-at-home order that bars restaurant dining, shuts salons and limits retail in an effort to curb spiraling coronavirus infections and hospitalizations. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

Andrew Noymer, a public health professor at University of California, Irvine, questioned how many residents would opt in due to privacy concerns and the value of the tool if they don't.

He said people may find themselves paralyzed by a flood of information and it isn't clear what they'll do with it—especially if they take a coronavirus test after getting an alert and wind up negative, only to

receive another alert.

"In a purely epidemiological perspective, uptake is everything. If about 10% of people do it, it's useless," he said. "Even if it does get takers. It's still unproven. Because then, what do you do?""

Over the past two weeks, California has reported a quarter of a million positive virus cases. The 7-day average for new virus cases on Monday neared 22,000, a 50% increase over the prior week, state data shows.



People drop their test kits into an intake receptacle at a COVID-19 testing site in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles on Saturday, Dec. 5, 2020. With coronavirus cases surging at a record pace, California Gov. Gavin Newsom

announced a new stay-at-home order and said if people don't comply the state's hospitals will be overwhelmed with infected patients.(AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

More than 10,000 people were hospitalized with COVID-19, including more than 2,300 in intensive care, Newsom said.

The state's 400 hospitals are at about 80% capacity but there are hospitals in San Diego, Imperial, and Los Angeles counties with intensive care units that are full, said Carmela Coyle, president of the California Hospital Association. Hospitals are limited by staff shortages following a spike in virus cases around Halloween, she said.

"These numbers do not yet include the Thanksgiving holiday, and the gathering of families just a week or so ago so. We do expect that this will get far worse before it gets better," she said.

Newsom's administration issued the stay-at-home rules closing restaurant dining, salons and playgrounds in Southern California and a large swath of the state's Central Valley agricultural region after more than 85% of beds in intensive care units were occupied in those regions. Five San Francisco Bay Area counties voluntarily joined the rules over ICU capacity concerns. Those restrictions will last until Jan. 4, a week longer than the state's timeline.



A lone masked pedestrian walks past the Bollywood Indian Restaurant open for take out in the Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles on Sunday Dec. 6, 2020. Many Californians were preparing Sunday for a new stay-at-home order that bars restaurant dining, shuts salons and limits retail in an effort to curb spiraling coronavirus infections and hospitalizations. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

Ten months into the pandemic, most of the state is now back to where it started with the stay-at-home rules. But unlike in March, when the pandemic was in its infancy and California was the first state to impose such rules, fewer people are likely to obey them.

Some business owners said they would keep their doors open and several law enforcement agencies say they won't enforce the rules and are counting on people to voluntarily wear masks and practice physical

distancing to protect themselves and their families.

Lu Garcia Reynoso, who owns a Southern California barbershop, told the [Press-Enterprise](#) he'll stay open. She's concerned salons may move underground to avoid being detected.

The recent rise in coronavirus infections began in October and is being blamed largely on people ignoring safety measures and socializing with others.



Masked customers wait in line outside Sweet Butter Cafe, for their take out order in the Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles on Sunday Dec. 6, 2020. Many Californians were preparing Sunday for a new stay-at-home order that bars restaurant dining, shuts salons and limits retail in an effort to curb spiraling coronavirus infections and hospitalizations. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



People wait in line to be tested for COVID-19 at a testing site in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles on Saturday, Dec. 5, 2020. With coronavirus cases surging at a record pace, California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a new stay-at-home order and said if people don't comply the state's hospitals will be overwhelmed with infected patients.(AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



People wait in line to be tested at an outside COVID-19 testing site in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles on Saturday, Dec. 5, 2020. With coronavirus cases surging at a record pace, California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a new stay-at-home order and said if people don't comply the state's hospitals will be overwhelmed with infected patients.(AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



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People swab their cheeks at a COVID-19 testing site in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles on Saturday, Dec. 5, 2020. With coronavirus cases surging at a record pace, California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a new stay-at-home order and said if people don't comply the state's hospitals will be overwhelmed with infected patients.(AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



A woman swabs a child at an outside COVID-19 testing site in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles on Saturday, Dec. 5, 2020. With coronavirus cases surging at a record pace, California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a new stay-at-home order and said if people don't comply the state's hospitals will be overwhelmed with infected patients.(AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



People drop their COVID-19 test kits into an intake receptacle after being tested at a site in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles on Saturday, Dec. 5, 2020. With coronavirus cases surging at a record pace, California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a new stay-at-home order and said if people don't comply the state's hospitals will be overwhelmed with infected patients. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)

Under the new stay-at-home rules, retailers including supermarkets and shopping centers can operate with 20% capacity while restaurant dining and hair and nail salons must close.

Schools that are currently open can continue providing in-person instruction.

But Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second-largest, on Monday announced the suspension of all school-based instructional and childcare programs and conditioning programs for student athletes due to the record number of virus cases.

Starting on Thursday, Californians will be able to activate the new "exposure notification" tool in their iPhone settings or on Android phones by downloading the CA Notify app from the Google Play store. Many residents will get a notification inviting them to participate.

Officials said the encounters are temporarily logged in a way that doesn't reveal a person's identity or geographic location.

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