EXPLAINER: What to do if you test positive for COVID-19

December 22 2021, by Mike Stobbe

Spencer Savitz gets tested for COVID-19 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2021, in New York. U.S. health officials are calling on Americans to get tested for COVID-19 before they travel and gather for the holidays. But what should you do if you test positive? Credit: AP Photo/Brittainy Newman

You've tested positive for COVID-19. Now what?

The short answer for those in the U.S.: Stay home and avoid others. Tell the people you've been in close contact with that you tested positive. And if you have trouble breathing or develop other serious symptoms, see a doctor immediately.

COVID-19 diagnoses have been soaring since the recent arrival of the omicron variant. That means Americans should prepare for the possibility that they or someone they plan to see will suddenly be diagnosed with an infection.

ISOLATION

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people who test positive stay home or isolate for 10 days. If you live with other people, that means staying in a separate room and using a separate bathroom, if possible. You should also wear a mask if you come into contact with others.

It's important to plan for this possibility and be ready to delay holiday gatherings, "so you don't make it up on the fly and don't cause a lot of confusion and unhappiness," advised Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious diseases specialist at Vanderbilt University.

MONITOR SYMPTOMS

You should get care if you develop worrisome symptoms. But there are many people with certain conditions—including heart diseases, diabetes and weakened immune systems—who should seek care even if they have mild illness, because of their elevated risk for developing serious complications.

TELL OTHERS

You should tell your doctor about your test, who may prescribe medications depending on your situation and health.

If you get tested at a clinic or doctor's office, the staff is supposed to notify health authorities about your positive result. Some health departments conduct contact-tracing investigations to identify the people an infected person has been in contact with.

You should also tell your close contacts that you tested positive and that they may have been exposed to the coronavirus. Remember, an infected person can begin spreading the virus as many as two days before developing symptoms or testing positive.

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