



Dr. the Hon. Duane Sands
Minister of Health

COVID-19 Update Press Conference

The Ministry of Health
Thursday, 16 April, 2020

Good afternoon,

Let me begin by providing you with the latest information on COVID-19 in The Bahamas.

During this COVID-19 fight, we have lost nine people.

Our condolences go out to the family of the latest victim, and to the families of the eight other people who lost their lives to the virus.

Let us keep these families in our prayers in their time of grief.

Earlier today, the Ministry of Health confirmed an additional case of COVID-19, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in The Bahamas to 54 – 45 in New Providence, 7 in Grand Bahama, 1 in Bimini and 1 in Cat Cay.

Currently, there have been –

- 668 samples tested for COVID-19;
- 54 have been confirmed positive, an increase of one from yesterday;

- 612 tests were confirmed negative; and
- Zero samples are pending.

At the last press conference, we advised that persons suffering from comorbidities are at a very high risk and can experience death if COVID-19 is contracted.

We speak of:

- The elderly, those 60 and older with and without chronic diseases;
- Those with chronic diseases – for example, people with hypertension, diabetes, kidney disease, chronic lung disease, including asthma, heart disease, sickle cell disease and the morbidly obese;
- Those who are immune compromised – such as those with HIV/AIDS, or cancer and those on medicines such as steroids or chemotherapy;
- Those who are pregnant.

Today we break down for you information related to the nine lives we lost.

The nine (9) deaths are as follows:

Case	Age	Sex	Island
#17	67	Female	New Providence
#18	72	Male	New Providence
#20	91	Male	New Providence
#21	57	Female	Bimini
#22	79	Male	New Providence
#23	80	Male	Grand Bahama
#31	50	Male	New Providence
#40	51	Female	Grand Bahama
#41	56	Female	New Providence

These cases are from the category of the most vulnerable.

- Their ages range from 57 to 91 years old;
- 7 out of the 9 cases who died had comorbidities, or underlying illnesses;
- 4 out of 9 or 44.4 percent of the cases were obese;
- 3 out of 9 or 33.3 percent of the cases suffered from hypertension;
- 2 out of 9 or 22.2 percent of the cases experienced asthma;

- 1 out of 9 or 11.1 percent of the cases suffered from either sleep apnea, dyslipidemia (or high lipids in the blood), renal failure and diabetes;
- There are five males and four females; and
- One of the deceased is from Bimini, five from New Providence and two from Grand Bahama.

My fellow Bahamians, it is a fact that as of April 16th, our COVID-19 confirmed deaths are 6.4 times more likely to have comorbidities or underlying conditions.

Our Surveillance Team will continually pursue contact tracing for persons who were exposed to the COVID-19 cases.

We have identified 892 contacts through our contact tracing system.

It has been proven that a country's ability to appropriately monitor, evaluate, and implement policies and clinically support its citizenry are keys to containing an outbreak of COVID-19.

One of the lynchpins of evaluation of COVID-19 is laboratory testing.

The World Health Organization and other leading health institutions support enhanced testing capabilities.

Consequently, the Ministry of Health is planning our testing expansion for COVID 19 in at-risk populations such as contacts of active cases, nursing homes, the prison and with health care workers.

Expanded testing is critical for us to have an increased understanding of the pandemic in The Bahamas so we can plan and prepare to protect these vulnerable populations.

To determine our COVID-19 positive cases and to gauge community spread, it is important to have a sustained testing mechanism.

I take this moment to elaborate on the testing process for COVID-19.

There are currently two different types of tests:

1. The genetic/molecular test, or real time polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test. This test requires -
 - a. evidence of an infectious agent;
 - b. the genetic material or RNA of the virus; and

- c. swab samples from the nose and throat of a suspected case.
2. The serological test or blood test. This test requires:
- a. evidence of the body's reaction to the virus;
 - b. the presence of antibodies, IgM and IgG; and
 - c. a sample of blood from a suspected case.

Currently, The Bahamas has instituted RT-PCR as the gold standard in-country, and it is performed at the accredited National Reference Lab.

We are exploring the introduction of rapid testing.

The first step in the process requires in-country validation of the rapid serological testing.

It is confirmed that although rapid test kits give faster results at a cheaper price, they are often inaccurate.

Since all of the many types of these tests have not yet been internationally validated, the Ministry of Health is only exploring this method currently and not using it as a confirmatory method at this time.

Once our validation process is completed, and if the tests are found to correlate with our gold standard method, wider screening for COVID-19 at the community level will commence. There are 10,000 rapid test kits in-country.

Currently, the Ministry of Health has some 7,000 RT-PCR test kits to start expanded testing using this method.

These RT-PCR test kits are sterile and designed to detect if a patient is currently infected with COVID-19. The test is highly sensitive and specific.

Persons tested using this method and identified to be positive are determined to be truly confirmed positive cases of COVID-19.

This test does not give false negatives. That is why it is known as gold standard of testing for COVID-19.

RT-PCR testing is carefully carried out at the National Reference Laboratory here in New Providence.

The National Reference Laboratory is internationally accredited by the College of American Pathologists, and is the only laboratory in The Bahamas certified by the Pan American

Health Organization/World Health Organization to perform COVID-19 testing.

This means that all other tests for the diagnosis of COVID-19 outside the purview of the Ministry of Health must first be approved for use in The Bahamas.

I wish to assure the Bahamian people that the National Reference Laboratory receives a continuous supply of test kits from the Pan American Health Organization.

So as it relates to the community, let's say you develop a fever, cough and shortness of breath. You have two choices:

1. call 511; or
2. call your healthcare provider and explain the symptoms you are experiencing.

A physician could recommend you complete a COVID-19 test.

What can you expect of the RT-PCR test?

1. A swab will be inserted into your nostril, deep into the nose and a separate swab inserted into the throat.
2. The swab is then placed in a tube and transported to the National Reference Lab for RT-PCR molecular genetic testing;
3. At the lab, the lab technician extracts the RNA (genetic material) from the swab sample. All humans have RNA, but people infected with COVID-19 will also have RNA from the virus. This RNA can be isolated and detected on the basis of its unique genetic sequence that is specific to that particular virus.
4. The isolated sample RNA is mixed with a special mixture of PCR chemicals that look for and detect specific COVID-19 genes in the sample.
5. This mixture containing sample RNA is run on a PCR instrument, which allows for a chemical reaction to occur. If the person is infected with the virus, this chemical

reaction results in the amplification, or multiplication, of the specific COVID-19 virus genes.

When the amplified signal is detected on the PCR instrument, this person would be deemed positive for the COVID-19 virus.

If the person is not infected with the virus, there will be no amplification of COVID-19 genes because there would have been no COVID-19 RNA in the original swab sample. This person would be considered negative for COVID-19.

The results are usually ready within 24 – 72 hours.

It is important for the public to understand that if you are swabbed at

- a public clinic;
- the Princess Margaret Hospital; or
- Doctors Hospital, or
- the Surveillance Unit

the same physician who took your swabbed sample will be the same physician who will most likely give you the results, or the Ministry of Health.

Therefore, it is important that you only follow the advice and direction given by your healthcare provider seen at the location of your choice.

Please ensure that you receive at all times prescribed medical direction from an authorized source.

Today, I also wish to inform the public that we are streamlining and reorganizing our resources to better respond to the spread of COVID-19.

The South Beach Health Centre has been identified as the site for a dedicated COVID-19 Urgent Care and Referral Centre.

Plans are in place for the centre to operate 24 hours per day as necessary.

The purpose of the centre is to assess persons suspected of being COVID-19 positive who have been referred by:

- the COVID-19 Triage Support Unit;

- the COVID-19 help line;
- a medical team; or
- those who are self-referred.

The function of the South Beach Health Centre is:

- to collect samples from patients who are suspected to be COVID-19 positive who are clinically stable, and to treat them appropriately; and
- to accept overflow patients of laboratory-confirmed or suspected COVID-19 positive patients from other facilities who can be appropriately managed in the centre.

The public is advised that the South Beach Health Centre is now open and will accommodate positive COVID-19 patients who are considered to have mild to moderate symptoms.

This facility will only accommodate patients transferred directly from the Princess Margaret Hospital, at this time.

Starting Monday the 20th of April, walk-in patients referred by the 511 COVID-19 Call Centre will be able to access medical care.

For those who are accustomed to attending the South Beach Health Centre for regular medical services, we are asking you to please visit the Elizabeth Estates Clinic instead.

I want to end by continuing to encourage you to donate blood.

There is an urgent need to replenish our blood supply.

This is an easy way you can help save lives.

The blood banks at the Princess Margaret Hospital and Doctors Hospital will stage continuous blood drives to facilitate donations.

These blood drives are expected to begin April 29th from 8am to 5pm at the National Stadium.

Further information will soon be provided.

The blood drives will be promoted for public awareness and support, and will facilitate a Q&A for potential donors to optimize on those best suited to give blood.

Please come forward and donate.

The Ministry of Health supports those entrepreneurs who are actively engaged in designing and producing protective face masks locally.

It has come to our attention that some persons are using the PAHO/WHO logo to validate their products.

We respectfully request that you refrain from this illegal practice.

Thank you, and Good Afternoon.