

Dated: July 01, 2020

**Empowering citizens for testing of SARS-CoV-2virus
to save precious lives and contain the virus**

**Dear Chief Secretary/ Administrator
Adviser to Governor/Advisor to Lt. Governor**

1. At the outset, I would like to compliment you and your team for the immense efforts being made to contain the SARS-CoV-2 virus and save the lives of people during this pandemic. While morbidity and mortality have been relatively low in most parts of the country, as compared to many other countries in the world, the virus has been spreading to newer areas. In this backdrop, it is important to maintain strict vigil and continue to make all possible efforts to minimize the damage that can be caused by this pandemic. With the start of Unlock-2, focus will continue to be on saving lives and also protecting livelihood as more and more economic activities are expected to pick up gradually.
2. Since 'test-track-treat' is the key strategy for early detection and containment of the pandemic, it is important to augment testing for SARS-CoV-2 in all parts of the country. This is the only way to detect the infection early and prevent its spread. To ramp up testing in the country, ICMR has so far approved a total of 1,049 public and private laboratories for COVID-19 testing. Of this, 761 labs are in public sector and 288 are in private sector. Further, ICMR has also recommended use of a rapid point-of-care antigen test kit for diagnosis and more such kits are being validated to increase the available options to the citizens.
3. However, it has been observed that in some States/ UTs, the capacity utilization of the testing labs particularly the ones in private sector, is grossly sub-optimal. It is strongly advised that you should take all possible steps to ensure full capacity utilization of all COVID-19 testing laboratories in the State/ UT.
4. It has also been observed that some States/ UTs have mandated the need of a prescription from a Government doctor for making an individual eligible to undergo COVID-19 test. In view of the increased load on government healthcare facilities, this mandatory requirement may at times pose an impediment for an individual to get tested and lead to unnecessary delays. At this juncture, it is absolutely necessary to facilitate testing at the earliest by enabling all qualified medical practitioners including private practitioners to prescribe COVID test to any individual fulfilling the criteria for testing as per ICMR guidelines. In fact, ICMR strongly recommends that laboratories should be free to test any individual in accordance to the ICMR guidelines and State authorities must not restrict an individual from getting tested, as early testing will help in containing the virus and saving lives.

5. I would like to draw your attention towards the available modalities for testing. While RT-PCR is the gold standard for diagnosis of COVID-19, ICMR has recently approved the use of a point-of-care rapid antigen test for early detection of COVID-19. The test is quick, simple, safe and can be used as a point-of-care test in containment zones as well as hospitals, as per criteria specified by ICMR for testing. Detailed information can be accessed at:

- i) [https://www.icmr.gov.in/pdf/covid/strategy/Advisory for rapid antigen test14062020.pdf](https://www.icmr.gov.in/pdf/covid/strategy/Advisory%20for%20rapid%20antigen%20test14062020.pdf)
- ii) [https://www.icmr.gov.in/pdf/covid/strategy/New additional Advisory 23062020 2.pdf](https://www.icmr.gov.in/pdf/covid/strategy/New%20additional%20Advisory%2023062020%202.pdf)

6. In view of the above, it is requested that impediments, which restrict testing may be removed forthwith. Further, to facilitate testing:

- i.) Efforts should be made in 'campaign mode' by setting up camps/ using mobiles vans in high incidence areas to collect samples of all symptomatic individuals as well as their contacts, and get those samples tested by using rapid antigen tests. The positive individuals should be treated according to the treatment protocol and the negative ones should be tested for RT-PCR;
- ii.) The rate for RT-PCR test by private labs should be finalized.
- iii.) It should be mandatory for all labs to upload the testing data on the ICMR database as well as report to State/ District/ City authorities for surveillance and contact tracing.

7. I am sure while you will take immediate steps to facilitate and ramp up testing in your state, it is expected that equal attention will be paid to 'contact tracing' as it holds the key to containing the virus. It has been observed that in some states, delineation of containment zones and contact tracing has not been undertaken with the rigour and meticulousness that is required. You make like to review this aspect at the earliest and take necessary corrective measures.

With regards

Yours sincerely

[Dr. Balram Bhargava]
Secretary
D/o Health Research and DG, ICMR

[Preeti Sudan]
Secretary
D/o Health and Family Welfare