Experts Suggest Regular COVID-19 Testing of College Students

Lower-quality coronavirus tests, mask wearing and frequent handwashing can help control coronavirus infections on campuses.

August 3, 2020 By Alicia Green

As colleges prepare to reopen in the fall, many are mulling over strategies to keep their students and staff safe and healthy. New findings published in the journal JAMA Network Open propose that undergraduates and upperclassmen must be tested frequently for COVID-19 if campuses hope to remain open.

For the study, researchers modeled a hypothetical cohort of 4,990 students without COVID-19 and 10 students with undetected asymptomatic cases. Findings showed that screening college students every two days with a lower-quality test that caught 70% (or less) of cases was the most cost-effective way to keep infections at a controllable number than screening weekly with a higher-quality test.

In addition, scientists noted that less frequent testing would suffice if colleges and their students adhered to a strict policy of wearing masks indoors and practicing frequent handwashing.

The researchers also advised that overtesting could result in a lot of false-positive cases, which might result in students losing trust in university surveillance programs and trigger overcrowding in quarantine spaces. This is why researchers recommend highly specific tests to lessen the chances of false-positive results.

“Our view is that if you can’t see your way toward at least minimal meeting of these screening standards or maintaining control over prevention, then a school really needs to ask itself if it has any business reopening,” said A. David Paltiel, MBA, PhD, a professor of public health at Yale and lead author of the study, to CNN.

The researchers warned colleges that infrequent testing of students and waiting to act only when symptoms emerged would not suffice to contain an outbreak.

However, in a commentary that accompanied the report, other scientists observed that the study’s conclusions underestimated students’ ability to adhere to behavioral interventions as well as public health efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 on campuses.

Nevertheless, Paltiel stressed that educators must take care to help students keep the coronavirus out of their schools. This means providing individuals with adequate screening, masks and hand hygiene supplies so everyone can properly comply with protocols.

For related coverage, read "CDC: COVID-19 Can Result in Prolonged Illness, Even in Young Adults." Also, click here for more coronavirus news.

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