It’s been a couple of weeks since my last update, so this one will be a long one!

First of all, we will be starting a different telemedicine platform next Monday. Up until now, we have been using Zoom, which is not HIPPA-compliant but has served well in this emergency situation. Now we will be using a secure platform called Chiron, which you will need to download onto your Apple or Android phone. If you want to do it from your computer, you will need to use Chrome and Firefox web browsers. When you schedule a telemedicine appointment, you will get an email sent to you to confirm your email address and give you instructions on how to download the app and log in for the first time. Please make sure you go through all the instructions well before your appointment so there is time for troubleshooting. You will test your screen and microphone, confirm your insurance information, enter credit card information for your co-pay, and sign an authorization to allow a telemedicine appointment. Don’t worry if you don’t see your secondary insurance listed, as we have that on file and all the billing goes through our office. And if you have any questions about your bills later, we will work with you directly. On the day of your appointment, you will receive another email reminder about your appointment time. Please set a timer to remind yourself to log in to the app five minutes before your appointment. Once you log in, you will wait in the virtual waiting room. Just as with normal office visits, there may be a little bit of a wait, as previous appointments do not necessarily finish on time. However, if you are waiting more than 5-10 minutes, please call the office to find out what’s going on.

However, the biggest issue right now is COVID-19 antibody testing, and we have been inundated with calls about this. The bottom line is that for right now, I do not recommend that most people get antibody testing right now (although this may change in the future), and the explanation below will take a little while to get through.

1) The regular test for COVID-19 infection is a swab from your nose or mouth that is meant to detect actual virus particles. If you have have symptoms from COVID, or if you are an asymptomatic carrier, this test should be positive. The antibody test is a blood test to look for PAST exposure to the virus. When a virus enters your body, your body produces many different types of antibodies that attach to the virus particle so that your body can fight it off. Some of these antibodies attached to the part of the virus that prevents it from entering your body’s cells and therefore protects you from infection (known as neutralizing antibodies), and other antibodies attach to different parts of the virus and may not protect against infection. It can take a couple of weeks to develop antibodies, so if you are actively having symptoms of COVID, the antibody test is NOT the best test to take.

2) An important concern is the significance of having antibodies to COVID. If you have antibodies, it is supposed to mean that you have been exposed, and therefore should have some degree of immunity to it. After all, there are reports of people that have recovered from COVID, and their donated blood has helped other sick people supposedly recover from the disease. What is unknown, however, is how long immunity may last for. Exposure to some viruses such as Hepatitis A will give you lifelong immunity to that virus, but exposure or vaccinations to other viruses such as influenza will only give you protective antibodies that last a few months, and that’s the reason why you have to get a flu shot every single year. At this point, we don’t know how long COVID antibodies will last in your body, so this idea of an “immunity passport” to allow people to travel and work if they have antibodies is really unproven and potentially dangerous. There is a link to a good article about this below.

3) Finally, it is important to address the quality of the tests themselves. In general, if have a blood test, you expect the results to be accurate. When a company develops a new test, they usually have to undergo extensive testing to prove that their test measures what it supposed to, but usually this takes time. Tests usually have to be approved by the FDA for them to be able to be marketed. But because of the current crisis and the need for rapid development of tests, the FDA has issued Emergency Use Authorizations (EUAs) for certain tests developed by certain companies, which just means that these tests are AUTHORIZED by the FDA based on preliminary data. Of the 70 or so companies that are trying to develop an antibody test in the US, the vast majority have NOT received an EUA from the FDA, so there really is no one to vouch for the accuracy of their test. As of this writing, there are only eight serology tests available that have received an EUA from the FDA (you can see them in the link below). Certainly more tests will be authorized in the future, but some companies may be forced to stop marketing their tests if the FDA determines they are not accurate enough. All of the tests that have received an EUA are allowed to market their test only until the end of this crisis. If they apply and receive APPROVAL from the FDA, they are then allowed to continue marketing their tests after this emergency is over. As far as I know, no tests have yet been APPROVED by the FDA, only tests that have received the emergency AUTHORIZATION. I am explaining all of this so that you all will be better informed when reading in the news about these tests, as articles are often inaccurate. There are many antibody tests that are not authorized by the FDA, there are currently 8 antibody tests that ARE authorized by the FDA, and there are currently no antibody tests that are actually approved by the FDA.

Knowing all this, many of you may still want an antibody test. We have learned that LabCorp actually emailed many of its patients this week advertising that they now have an antibody test available. I strongly oppose their tactics, as it seems to be a self-serving attempt to get more business by marketing directly to the public as opposed to providers. What you should know is that the antibody test they offer was actually developed by LabCorp and has NOT currently received an EUA from the FDA, meaning it is NOT an authorized test. Quest Diagnostics, on the other hand, is using an assay developed by Abbott, which IS one of the tests that have received emergency authorization. Therefore, at this point in time I would recommend using the Quest test if you want to be tested.

Bottom line

* The antibody test may indicate that you were exposed to COVID in the past and should not be used to diagnose current infection.
* If you have a positive test, it may be a false positive as it could detect previous exposure to a different coronavirus in the past, and if you have a negative test, you still could have been exposed to COVID in the past, but just have different antibodies than the one tested for.
* If you do have antibodies, we don’t know if you are truly immune, and if you are immune, we don’t know how long the immunity will last.
* Having antibodies is NOT a reason for you to stop social distancing, washing your hands, avoiding touching your face.

If you still want to have antibody testing for COVID, we can order it for you as long as you understand the points above. Just send us a portal message, and if you are due for other labs, we may have you do those labs at the same time.

Thank you for sticking through this long email. I have included below some links to videos and webpages that you may find interesting.

Fun to watch video demonstrating how easily viruses spread:

https://youtu.be/I5-dI74zxPg

Good explanation about “immunity passports” and an important explanation of the statistics associated with the antibody tests:

https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/beware-of-antibody-based-covid-19-immunity-passports/

Sobering scientific lecture from Scripps Research on the origins of COVID-19, and predictions of its future. Long introduction, lecture starts at 10:36:

<https://youtu.be/l1OEgl5Bgls>

Announcement and explanation from FDA about EUAs for serologic tests:

https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-serological-tests

Updated list of companies that have actually received EUAs for their tests:

[https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/emergency-situations-medical-devices/emergency-use-authorizations#covid19ivd](https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/emergency-situations-medical-devices/emergency-use-authorizations%22%20%5Cl%20%22covid19ivd)