

Tiered COVID-19 Testing System Exceeding Weekly Goal, Pentagon Says



U.S. Marines with Marine Rotational Force-Darwin arrive to Royal Australian Air Force Base Darwin, Australia, on July 24 and undergo testing for COVID-19. U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Sarah Marshall

ARLINGTON, Va. — The tiered system for testing of U.S. military personnel for COVID-19, considered a key element in defeating the novel coronavirus, has exceeded the goal of 56,000 tests per week, Defense Department officials told Pentagon reporters on July 30.

Not only has the program exceeded the 56,000 tests-per-week goal set in May, the Defense Department has been administering nearly 60,000 tests per week for several months, said Air Force Major Gen. Lee E. Payne, assistant director for combat support at the Defense Health Agency and a medical doctor.

“We’ve seen testing increase five-fold in the last three months, and to date, we’ve conducted over 540,000 tests since January,” said Lee, who also leads the Pentagon’s diagnostic and testing task force.

Defense Department personnel are testing positive for COVID-19 at lower rates than the general population, except for the 18- to 24-year-old age group, said Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs, the Joint Chiefs of Staff surgeon. The reason is not attributable to young people’s behavior, but because they are the largest demographic group across the U.S. armed services and are tested more, especially those who are incoming recruits, he added.

The Defense Department unveiled the priority-based, four-

tiered system on April 22, when the department's testing ability was limited by equipment shortages and slow turnarounds on test results. Tier 1 targeted critical national-security capabilities, like strategic nuclear deterrent units. Tier 2 focused on engaged, fielded forces around the world, while Tier 3 was for testing forward-deployed and redeploying forces. The remainder of the military makes up Tier 4.

Even with the rise in testing, infection rates for COVID-19 among active-duty military have held steady for several weeks at 5.7%, Payne said. The cumulative number of service personnel hospitalized for COVID-19 has been far less than the number diagnosed with the virus and far less than medical experts expected in January and February, Friedrichs noted.

"There were a lot of unknowns" about COVID-19 back then, he said, adding, "We have a lot more knowledge today about how to treat those infected."