I certainly haven't lacked material for my monthly Times-Union column recently and today is no exception. Having just last week tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, my 'new experience' has given me a closer perspective of this menace.

It can take up to twelve days before symptoms develop after one has been infected. Social distancing, wearing a mask, and hand hygiene are the fundamental practices to prevent the spread of infection that we have been talking about since March. Being ever mindful of the importance of those measures, a lapse of compliance can open the door.

This new virus creates a certain level of anxiety. First, there is the uncertainty of just what is COVID and what will it do to me. What are the symptoms and what do I do if I have symptoms? What does a positive test mean to me, my family, and my job? Now facing those uncertainties of the infection, the importance of testing becomes obvious.

Testing in our community is available on demand for anyone with concerns. This could be either symptoms they develop or exposure through close contact (defined by the CDC as contact less than six feet for greater than 15 minutes) to someone who has tested positive. There is a standard nasal swab test that takes three to five days to get results and a rapid test that can be completed in 5-10 minutes.

How reliable is the testing? I have been assured that both tests are very reliable when the results show a positive. They are a little less accurate when the test shows negative. For the most part, with this new pathogen, our local testing is considered as accurate as anywhere.

Why is testing so important? With a positive test, isolation can begin immediately as can contact tracing to identify those that you have come into close contact with who are at risk. *Isolation and contact tracing* are two very critical tools we have to control the spread of the virus.

What have we learned about the virus since this began? As we have gained clinical experience and have been able to study the public health data, we have improved our understanding of testing, quarantine procedures, recovery times, and contact tracing. For example, the CDC currently recommends an isolation period of 10 days from the onset of symptoms for someone with a positive test. This number of days has been refined several times since the beginning of the pandemic as more cases become available to study.

The most important thing we have learned, however, is that masking has been shown to be quite effective against this virus. We know it works! We can't say that enough! Masking is proven to minimize spread and save lives.

Do we need a county-wide 'mask order'? No, I don't think anyone needs to feel forced to wear a mask. But I would be very happy if individual businesses chose to require them. I also think it is a personal responsibility to protect not only ourselves but our families and the community we come into contact with.

Please do your part by wearing a mask when out in public and not able to socially distance. A lapse of compliance can open the door.