



Missoula City-County Health Department

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Health Officials Announce Missoula's First Cases of COVID-19

The Missoula City-County Health Department reports that two Missoula residents have tested positive for COVID-19 at the Department of Public Health and Human Services lab in Helena. The state lab has sent samples to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for confirmation.

Both cases have cooperated with health officials and have isolated themselves at home to prevent further spread, neither patient needing supportive care. A public health nurse from the department will check in with each person daily to see if symptoms worsen. If so, the department will facilitate transportation to a health care provider.

The health department is also working on identifying close contacts for follow-up, including symptom monitoring and separation from the public for 14 days. Nurses from the health department will check in with each close contact twice daily to ensure that they do not develop symptoms. If any of them do, the health department will connect them with a health care provider for testing.

Currently, it is unknown where each person may have been exposed to the virus. The health department is confidentially notifying persons who may have been exposed to either case. Those who are asymptomatic and are not informed by the health department do not need a test for COVID. "There is no evidence that the test is accurate before symptoms present," said Cindy Farr, Incident Commander. "However, it is very accurate as a diagnostic tool if someone develops symptoms," which include fever, coughing, and difficulty breathing. Anyone experiencing these symptoms should call their health care provider, a focused screening center, or use the Ask a Nurse line or the Providence online screening tool before seeking medical attention. Contact information is available on the health department's website.

While this announcement understandably raises concern, Health Officer Ellen Leahy encourages people to remember that pandemics are not about just the disease, but also people's response to it, so taking voluntary actions to reduce spread is the most helpful response. That doesn't mean that the presence of COVID-19 in Missoula should be taken lightly. People still need to be aware because the virus is new, which means everyone is potentially susceptible. COVID-19 is different than the seasonal flu because it has a higher mortality rate, and we don't have a vaccine. It's also clear that the elderly and those with underlying conditions are the hardest hit. "Only a small percentage of cases seen in China and Italy were people under 20," said Farr, which is why the health department recommends that those at high-risk avoid public places with large numbers of people.

Additionally, because the virus is new, there are a lot of unknowns such as how much spread we can expect, and when the outbreak will start to subside. Unlike the seasonal flu, which is monitored by a nationwide surveillance system, we have only the data collected since this virus's appearance to inform our actions.

What is clear is that the virus causes a respiratory illness which spreads through droplets like the flu. One can get it from touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and then touching their eyes, nose, or mouth, or by being in contact with someone who is symptomatic. This information informs the preventative measures that the public has heard so much about like handwashing, disinfecting surfaces, staying home when sick, and practicing social distancing—or avoiding crowds and maintaining separation from others.

The health department also encourages workplaces and other organizations to think about preparedness and how they can help stop the spread of COVID-19. Organizations should review sick leave policies, look at ways for employees, especially those at high-risk, to telework, and focus on the disinfection of frequently touched surfaces, including those in customer service areas.

The health department also applauds those organizations that have already made adjustments, including those who voluntarily decided to close or cancel events to protect public health. Of particular concern are indoor spaces that can support large numbers of people for long periods.

That doesn't mean that the guidance is the same for all facilities. Centers for Disease Control's guidance for this pandemic does not support closing schools preemptively, due to the downstream impacts and lack of evidence supporting such a measure. While there may be a time when closing a school or all schools could occur, it's not to be done lightly. Schools provide not only education but valuable support to kids and their families. Some students rely on schools for meals and mental health services. When schools close, their parents may be removed from the workforce, which could impact the health care system and other essential services. Their kids could then be placed in the care of grandparents who are at high-risk for illness or in daycare, congregating kids in an even smaller space. That said, when there are cases in the school, MCPS and the health department may close the affected school temporarily to allow the health department to determine who may have been exposed, allow for the school to make arrangements for high-risk students and staff, and to allow for additional school cleaning. Lastly, when schools close, one must consider when and how the school will reopen.

While the pandemic is just now hitting Missoula, the health department has been preparing for COVID-19 since things first started to unfold overseas. The department worked with state and local partners, got the word out to the public on how to protect themselves, and looked inward at resources and response plans. Missoula was prepared, not only due to planning and training but also due to the Board of Health's financial resourcefulness. While public health emergency preparedness grants help with preparedness and training, they don't cover a pandemic response. "This is the rainy day that we've saved for," said Leahy, "We're usually frugal, but now's the time to spend on staffing and resources."

The department also feels strength in their bond with community partners and stakeholders. Each week, the health department has calls with groups such as hospitals, long-term care, schools, and shelters to discuss guidance, concerns and figure out how to work toward solutions.

With confirmed cases in the county, the health department will continue to build on its plans and partnerships for an adequate response. However, the health department needs the public's help. Everyone needs to follow COVID prevention measures the best that they can and work together, checking in on neighbors, supporting each other, and accept that the inconveniences we experience now will minimize the impact to Missoulians, the economy, and the health care system.

If you have questions about COVID-19 or have questions on organizational preparedness, please visit <http://missoula.co/cvirus> or call the health department's hotline at 406-258-INFO. For information on testing and the number of cases statewide, visit <http://dphhs.mt.gov>.