

For immediate release

March 4, 2020

Contact: Eric Merchant, Disease Control Administrator, 406-457-8914

Gayle Shirley, Communications Manager, 406-457-8908, 439-4503

Public Health Responds to Growing Local Interest in COVID-19

Local interest in the global COVID-19 epidemic appeared to surge this week, based on a growing number of calls and emails to Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH).

So far, no cases of the mild to potentially fatal disease have been reported in the county or state. But LCPH has activated its emergency response team and is meeting regularly to prepare for the likelihood that it will spread here.

“At this point, most of our efforts are focused on sharing accurate and timely information with the public and coordinating with local partners, like medical providers and schools, to provide guidance and help them prepare to respond appropriately,” said Eric Merchant, administrator of the LCPH Disease Control and Prevention Division.

“The situation with COVID-19 is evolving rapidly,” he added. “We have the ability to ramp up our efforts as needed.”

LCPH has been posting information about the epidemic on its Facebook page and has developed a web page focused on COVID-19, www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19. The department gets frequent updates on the disease from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. It routinely shares this information with local medical providers and others.

“A lot of people are asking us what they should do to protect themselves from this virus, and that’s a good thing,” Merchant said. “There’s no vaccine to prevent it, like there is for the flu, although researchers are working on one.”

Assess Travel Risks

At this point, he said, the best thing people can do is avoid exposure to the virus. In part, this means avoiding travel to areas where the virus is epidemic. As of Wednesday, the CDC recommended that people avoid nonessential travel to China, Iran, South Korea, and Italy. It recommended that older adults and people who have chronic medical conditions consider postponing travel to Japan.

Travel alerts are likely to change as the disease spreads, Merchant said. Up-to-date information is available from LCPH by calling 457-8900 or visiting www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19.

Use Good Hygiene

Merchant also urged county residents to take seriously the everyday precautions that can help prevent the spread of flu and other germs, including coronavirus.

“You probably learned many of these things in childhood,” he said. “If not, these are habits you should be practicing now. They really work.”

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing;
- If soap and water aren't available, use a hand sanitizer containing 60 percent alcohol;
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick;
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth;
- Stay home when you're sick;
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue, and then throw the tissue in the trash; and
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated.

Forget the Masks

Health experts, including the U.S. Surgeon General, don't recommend that the general public buy or use facemasks. Masks primarily prevent a person from giving the disease to someone else and are less effective in preventing well people from getting sick.

“They should be reserved for people who show symptoms of COVID-19 and for health workers and others who are taking care of patients at home,” Merchant said.

People who are in direct contact with people who are infected must change their masks repeatedly.

Call If You're Sick

Symptoms of COVID-19 include a fever, cough, and difficulty breathing. If you have symptoms – and if you've been in close contact with someone who has the disease or have traveled to an area with ongoing spread – call your health-care provider *before* going to seek care. Tell your provider about your recent travel or contact.

Your provider will make sure you don't expose others in the office or hospital setting. He or she will also work with public health professionals to determine whether you need to be tested.