

For immediate release

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Long-Standing Process Works to Stop Spread of Contagious Disease

A case of COVID-19 in Broadwater County, just confirmed Friday, has neighbors in Lewis and Clark County wondering whether the patient might have spread the virus here, too.

“We want to assure people that we have a long-established process that’s designed to detect and stop the spread of infectious diseases,” said Drenda Niemann, health officer for Lewis and Clark County. “We feel confident that this process is working and that all appropriate measures are being taken to protect the people we serve.”

Public health nurses at Lewis and Clark Public Health already have experience using this process, called disease surveillance and containment, to find and monitor people with other diseases, like whooping cough and measles. Disease surveillance is used nationwide and is one of the basic functions of public health.

Isolation, quarantine, and closing public facilities and gatherings are measures public health can use to limit disease spread. Isolation separates sick people from those who are not sick. Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to contagious disease to see if they become sick.

When a person in the county is identified as having a contagious disease, public health nurses immediately contact the person by phone. In the case of COVID-19, nurses instruct the patient, if not hospitalized, to isolate himself at home, away from others who live there, until the disease has run its course.

Nurses work with the patient to try to determine when and where they were infected and where they’ve been since then – where they live, work, attend school, shop, and visit. The patient also is asked to provide a detailed list of anyone they’ve been in contact with since symptoms began.

Nurses then call these “contacts” and anyone else at risk based on the patient interview and instruct them to quarantine themselves at home for 14 days to see if they develop symptoms. The list of contacts can be small or extensive. If any of the contacts come down with the disease, nurses start working with them and their contacts.

“It’s important to note that, at this time, evidence shows that someone who doesn’t have symptoms of COVID-19 can’t spread COVID-19 to anyone else.” Niemann stressed.

She said anyone who thinks they may be sick with COVID-19 should call their medical provider.

“We realize that people are worried about COVID-19,” she added. “But the good news is that everyone has the ability to reduce their own risk by using social distancing and good personal hygiene.”

Social distancing means staying away from group settings, avoiding crowds, and staying about six feet away from others. Other recommendations are:

- 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 at least 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.

COVID-19 can cause mild to severe symptoms, and even death. The risk of death is highest for older people and those who have existing health conditions like heart disease, lung disease, or diabetes. About 80 percent of cases are mild, according to the World Health Organization.

For more information, visit the Lewis and Clark Public Health web page at www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19. You can also call LCPH at 457-8900 or email publichealth@lccountymt.gov.