Media Advisory

For immediate release
June 30, 2020

Mask up to slow COVID-19 surge in Yellowstone County

Billings, MT – As of Tuesday morning, June 30, Yellowstone County had confirmed 174 cases of COVID-19 in our residents; four have died. The number of cases has increased rapidly over the past week with 23 new cases reported since Sunday morning.

This growth in virus illness is largely driven by group gatherings among family and friends, according to case investigations by RiverStone Health public health nurses. Happy celebrations have become infection risks this summer.

"When phase 2 of the governor's plan to reopen the Big Sky State began on June 1, the rise in COVID-19 cases in mid-to-late June was predictable," said John Felton, Yellowstone County Health Officer and President and CEO of RiverStone Health. "The primary driver of increased cases is group gatherings where prevention measures like physical distancing and mask wearing are not prevalent."

Yellowstone County public health professionals at RiverStone Health have documented COVID-19 cases arising from contacts at weddings in different counties, barbecues, picnics and other large gatherings of family and friends.

"This Independence Day weekend, we must be especially vigilant to prevent happy holiday celebrations from turning into tragedies," Felton said.

Recent large-scale testing of people without symptoms – in nursing homes and assisted living centers and at MetraPark – have detected very few cases of COVID-19 in Yellowstone County. Most of the new cases seen in June have been identified by testing close contacts of people who are already sick. The majority of those illness have been traced to large gatherings of people who are relatives or friends.

Symptoms that some people attribute to allergies, can in fact, be symptoms of COVID-19. If you have allergy symptoms, wear a cloth face covering when you are with other people.

Wearing a mask helps protect you and the people around you. Because the COVID-19 incubation period can be up to 14 days, and people are thought to be most infectious 48 hours before showing symptoms, wearing a mask can help prevent further infections and deaths.
Recent information from the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation estimates that 33,000 deaths could be prevented by October 1 if 95 percent of Americans wore masks in public.

Medical workers wear masks daily, often all day, as a requirement of their jobs to prevent spreading germs. During this pandemic, because the new coronavirus spreads easily and is highly contagious, all adults, and children over age 2, should be wearing masks or cloth face coverings to help stop the spread of germs.

In absence of a vaccine to prevent COVID-19 infections, Felton strongly urges everyone to follow the three W's:
- Wear a mask when you are with people who don't live in your household.
- Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer frequently.
- Watch your physical distance, staying at least six feet apart from others whenever possible.

"Contact tracing indicates that Yellowstone County residents are spreading the virus to their loved ones," Felton said. "It's crucial for everyone to act responsibly to prevent the spread of COVID-19 – even if they don't have symptoms."

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