Media Information:

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Influenza, COVID-19 hospitalizing Yellowstone County residents

Billings, MT – Respiratory illnesses brought more people to Billings hospital emergency departments in November and the number of patients hospitalized with COVID-19 or influenza also increased.

The percentage of Billings hospital emergency department visits involving respiratory symptoms is at the highest level so far this fall and more than double the rate at this time last year with a variety of respiratory viruses circulating.

One Yellowstone County resident died of influenza during November, the first flu death this season in Montana. More than 630 cases of flu have been confirmed in Yellowstone County so far this fall, including 363 cases in people younger than 18. As of Dec. 6, at least 35 Yellowstone County residents have been hospitalized with flu so far this season, including four children.

In the United States, total annual direct medical costs of influenza (hospitalizations, emergency and clinic visits and medication) have been estimated to be $3.2 billion. Indirect costs (worker absenteeism and lost productivity) accounted for $8 billion annually. Most of the indirect costs result from people 18- to 64-years-old getting sick, according to "The Economic Burden of Influenza Among Adults Aged 18 to 64: A Systemic Review of Literature" published in May 2022.

At least 202 Yellowstone County residents tested positive for COVID-19 last week. Billings hospitals started November with a combined total of seven COVID-19 inpatients. Two weeks later, they had 23 hospitalized COVID-19 patients. Since our last monthly news release, RiverStone Health has received confirmation that six more Yellowstone County residents died from COVID-19 illness, bringing the county's pandemic death toll to 597 people since March 2020.

The latest Yellowstone County COVID-19 victims were:
- A man in his 70s who died on Dec. 1 at a Billings hospital. He was not vaccinated.
- A man in his 70s who died on Nov. 21 at a Billings hospital. He was vaccinated.
- A man in his 80s who died on Nov. 15 at a local elder care facility. He was vaccinated.
- A man in his 90s who died on Nov. 7 at a local elder care facility. He was vaccinated.

- A man in his 70s who died on Oct. 30 at home. He was vaccinated.
- A man in his 70s who died on Sept. 22 at a Billings hospital. He was vaccinated.

The October and September death reports were relayed by the Yellowstone County Clerk and Recorder's Office upon receiving the death certificates. All six men had underlying health conditions that put them at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19 infection.

Vaccines offer the safest scientifically proven protection against serious illness and death from flu and from COVID-19. Vaccines against flu and COVID-19 viruses are recommended for children as young as six months and everyone older. Both types of vaccines can be received at the same visit with your healthcare provider.

RiverStone Health Immunization Clinic provides vaccines for children and adults by appointment. COVID-19 vaccines remain available at no cost and RiverStone Health will work with individuals to make flu vaccine affordable. Please call 406.247.3382. Vaccines also are available at many other local clinics and pharmacies.

Good hygiene reduces your risk of being infected with and spreading respiratory viruses: frequent, thorough handwashing, covering your cough and sneeze and staying home when ill. People who are at high risk for serious respiratory illness may consider additional precautions, such as wearing a facemask in public and avoiding crowds. For more information, visit covid.riverstonehealth.org.

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