Media Information:

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Free vaccines still available as U.S. pandemic declaration ends

Billings, MT – With the end of the U.S. government's COVID-19 emergency declaration today, tests and treatment for the pandemic virus will remain available.

RiverStone Health Immunization Clinic, 123 S. 27th St., continues to offer COVID-19 booster shots and other recommended doses at no charge. Call 406.247.3382 for an appointment. Vaccines may also be available at other local clinics and pharmacies.

Yellowstone County residents continue to be diagnosed with COVID-19 infection. At least 66 Yellowstone County people tested positive for the virus in the last week of April. Since Jan. 1, the county has had 1,942 cases confirmed by testing through healthcare providers, according to the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

Since early 2021 when safe, effective vaccines became available, 240,307 doses have been administered to Yellowstone County's 164,000 residents, according to DPHHS. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently recommended that adults age 65 and older consider getting another booster shot if their last dose of COVID-19 vaccine was at least four months ago. Adults of any age whose immune system is compromised should consult their healthcare provider about getting another booster.

The number of cases has decreased drastically from the worst months in 2020 and 2021 when thousands of Yellowstone County residents were stricken and our hospitals were filled with seriously ill COVID-19 patients – many in critical condition needing ventilators to breathe. According to DPHHS, the pandemic virus has resulted in 14,332 Montanans being hospitalized and 3,711 Montanans dying. That death toll includes 623 Yellowstone County residents lost to COVID-19. Two hundred thirty of those county residents died in 2020, 264 died in 2021, 113 died in 2022 and 16 have died since Jan. 1 of this year.

When the virus first arrived in the Billings area in March 2020, there were no tests, vaccines or treatment. The virus itself has mutated continually over the past three years, so that it is generally more contagious, but less likely to result in serious illness or death.

The cost of COVID-19 at-home tests may not be covered by insurance from now on. Insurance providers are no longer required to waive costs or provide free COVID-19 tests.

Treatments for COVID-19 disease will remain available. Prescription medication to prevent severe COVID-19, such as Paxlovid, will be free while federally purchased supplies last. After that, the price will be determined by the medication manufacturer and your health insurance coverage. Check with your healthcare provider for guidance on treatment if you test positive for COVID-19.

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