



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ITASCA RESOURCE CENTER
1209 SE 2nd Ave, Grand Rapids MN 55744
Hearing impaired number TDD: 218-327-5549
(218) 327-2941
www.co.itasca.mn.us

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LOCAL PROVIDERS SEEING GROWTH IN COVID SPREAD, EFFECTIVENESS OF VACCINES

Infection rates continue to rise in Itasca County

(Grand Rapids, Minn. – Sept. 21, 2021) – COVID continues to spread quickly in Itasca County, especially among families and those in close settings such as sports teams, classrooms and events. New cases diagnosed numbered 138 between Sept. 15 and 21, raising the 14-day case rate to 53.4 per 10,000 residents.

COVID-19 has taken the life of its 71st Itasca County resident, a female in her 90s.

Opportunities for vaccination and testing also are growing again in the county. All area clinics offer free and easily accessed vaccines, including the addition of Pfizer at Scenic Rivers in Bigfork and periodic supplies of single-dose Johnson & Johnson available through county public health clinics. Itasca County remains at 50 percent of the total population vaccinated and at 58 percent of those currently eligible (12 and older).

“It’s important to keep in mind that, for Itasca County and northern Minnesota, our vaccination rates are pretty good, but they’re not great. So, we’re going to continue to have community transmission here until more people are vaccinated,” said Kayla Scrivner, chief operating officer, Scenic Rivers Health, serving Bigfork and other rural communities in the region.

“Heartfelt thank you to the community here in the Bigfork area – the schools, staff, the teachers, the parents, the students, everyone working in health care – physicians, nurses, providers – everyone that’s

pulling together right now to beat the outbreak that we're experiencing in our community. Thank you for continuing to be vigilant and take care of each other. Because in a community like ours, small and close-knit, there are people who overlap those systems. We are doing the best we can, but it has been a challenge to keep up with the demand right now. We are experiencing staffing shortages and certainly burn-out and fatigue right now among health care workers. We really appreciate everyone doing the right thing."

Sam Dwyer, pharmacist for Essentia Health Deer River, sees impacts of rising cases in the western part of the county as well. "In the Deer River area, we are seeing new cases of COVID-19, mostly among the unvaccinated group. While we also are seeing cases among those vaccinated, it's a consistent trend that our hospitalized patients tend to be unvaccinated. Breakthrough cases among vaccinated group tend to be more mild."

Dwyer also sees opportunity coming in the next two months for vaccines to be approved for younger children. "Through the FDA approval process, the safety and efficacy of our vaccines has been very well established. And vaccines make a difference."

Dr. Katy Johnson, OB/GYN for Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital, is seeing considerable interest in COVID vaccines among her patients. "The data that we have now show that the vaccine is safe in pregnancy and is also safe for women who are wanting to get pregnant or are breastfeeding. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists, the Society for Maternal Medicine and the American Society for Reproductive Medicine are all recommending that women get vaccinated regardless of their pregnancy status, whether or not they are breastfeeding or their future fertility plans.

"We know that women who are pregnant who get COVID are at higher risks for serious complications, including hospitalizations, ICU admissions, invasive ventilation and even death. And these are young women that should not be dying from COVID, but we know that pregnancy is that independent risk factor that can make them really sick. We also know that there are risks to unborn babies if you do get COVID when pregnant, especially if you get really sick, including pregnancy loss and preterm birth."

Dr. Dan Soular, family practice physician at Grand Itasca, agreed that experience and results of research are providing health care providers with even higher levels of confidence in vaccines. "There's not a lot I do in medicine that is 99 percent effective like these vaccines are. We have science behind us. Thank you to the significant majority of Minnesotans and Itasca residents who have been vaccinated. If anyone is hesitant or has concerns, reach out to your primary care provider. We are happy to have those conversations.

"It is a tough time of year. A lot of kids have viral illnesses, they have allergies. Unfortunately, a lot of those symptoms are similar to COVID symptoms. We are stressing the importance of keeping those kids home when they do have these symptoms, and the importance of testing because, unfortunately, without testing we really can't distinguish COVID from other viral illnesses or allergies that we typically see in the fall and winter."

"We certainly have had our ebbs and flows, our successes and struggles," said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health division manager. "We know so much more than we did in 2020 about the coronavirus, how it spreads, how to slow spread, and how vaccines have successfully decreased the amount of hospitalizations, ICU stays, severe illness and death from COVID.

“Delta is different in how it presents. Initial symptoms often include sore throat, headache, and runny nose versus the initial loss of taste and smell and cough that often led the symptoms of the initial make-up of the virus. If you or someone you know develops the headache, sore throat, or runny nose symptoms, consider being tested for COVID

“Viruses can only spread and mutate if they have a host; they do not survive on their own. The more people 12 and older we can get vaccinated, the more we wear masks and stay home if we are sick and stay at least 6 feet away from others, the sooner we can slow the spread and not offer this virus more chances to mutate and make people sicker.”

Itasca residents with questions or concerns may leave them at the Itasca County COVID message line, with calls returned 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The Itasca COVID line number is 218-327-6784.

--END--

Note to media: An online press briefing via ZOOM is scheduled for Sept. 16, 10:00 a.m., featuring local health professionals sharing what is known today about COVID-19 prevention and treatments.

Itasca County Public Health media contact: Kelly Chandler, 218-327-6144
and Kelly.Chandler@co.itasca.mn.us.