



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ITASCA COUNTY'S BOUT WITH COVID REMAINS SEVERE, WITH VACCINES DUE HERE SOON

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **Dec. 18, 2020**) – Itasca County residents' actions to prevent the spread of COVID are showing impacts, with new diagnoses slowing for the first time since mid-November. With vaccines on the horizon, local public health and hospital leaders are hopeful that the holidays don't bring a reversal.

"We again thank all who are making hard decisions each and every day to help keep COVID from spreading to our neighbors and our families," said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health division manager. "Each small decision brings us one step closer to reopening, to getting our sports back, our kids back to school and restaurants fully opened. This will be especially true during the upcoming holidays."

Severity of COVID cases among Itasca County residents remains high, with 71 hospitalized, 15 of whom are in intensive care.

Newly identified Itasca County cases of COVID-19 as of Dec. 17 totaled 151 over the past seven days and 409 over the past 14 days.

When measured as a 14-day average per 10,000 residents, Itasca County's rate is 87.6, still very high but trending down.

"On a very hopeful note, vaccines for COVID-19 have begun to arrive in Minnesota," said Chandler. "These first doses are being delivered to hub locations throughout the state and then redistributed to smaller health care entities for priority groups as recommended by Minnesota Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control. The hubs serving Itasca County are in Hibbing and Duluth."

Itasca County's first recipients will be our hospital workers, specifically those working in emergency rooms, intensive care units and other direct-care staff. Ambulance staff, public health staff involved in vaccinations and testing, and EMS-certified firefighters and law enforcement also are included in the first round.

Next are Itasca County's four skilled nursing facilities and their residents and staff, followed by other long-term care and assisted living facilities, other direct health care staff, persons with chronic health conditions, mission-critical personnel such as law enforcement and fire fighters



not previously vaccinated, persons required to keep utilities (water and power) operational, direct-care school staff, other congregate settings and so on.

“The priority groups have changed over time and could very well change again,” said Chandler. “Local public health professionals, pharmacies and clinics all have a role to play in vaccinating our community members and they are ready. Vaccines will be rolling out in phases over the next weeks and months, not overnight.

“We thank our Itasca neighbors for their patience and ask all to keep doing what we know slows the spread of COVID until we have a majority of our community receiving both doses of the vaccine, with the second dose 21 to 28 days following the first.”

Local health care facilities continue to adjust operations. Aaron Saude, CEO of Bigfork Valley hospital, reported in a briefing on Dec. 17 that they are seeing a lower emergency room volume and a decrease in patients needing evaluation or hospitalization due to COVID. Bigfork Valley has been able to offer capacity to other facilities in the region.

“We are excited to implement our vaccination plans,” said Saude. “I also want to say how grateful we are for how collaborative health care organizations in the county and the state have been during the pandemic, including sharing information. It’s especially important being an independent health care facility in northern Minnesota.”

“I agree. The collaboration that has been shown has been awesome,” said Kelly Skelly, administrator for Lakewood Surgery Center in Grand Rapids. “I’m very proud to be part of this community. Lakewood provides ambulatory surgical care and is open at 75 percent capacity, is 100 percent staffed, and focused on serving as a resource to the community and hospitals if they need to outsource their surgical needs.”

Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital continues to offer COVID testing for the community, with criteria remaining symptoms or exposure to someone with COVID (if not experiencing symptoms, they are asked to wait five days from exposure). Grand Itasca also is testing patients prior to surgery or travel, as well as other scenarios. As with all three of Itasca County’s clinics, persons are asked to call ahead for details and protocols.

According to Grand Itasca President and CEO Jean MacDonell, the facility is testing an average of 88 patients each day in December, which is down from November. Their highest day of testing, in November, was 178. The current positivity rate for tests conducted at Grand Itasca is 18%-19 percent, which is down a bit.

“We’ve been experiencing a surge of inpatients,” said MacDonell. “Facilities in Duluth remain full more often than not, although the metro has been a little better. With high levels of hospitalization, Grand Itasca is full and on “divert” in our ICU and medical-surgical departments on most days. We also are paying close attention to the holidays ahead and remain ready with surge plans.”



Grand Itasca has paused scheduling elective procedures that require an inpatient bed. “We have had to tighten our visitor policy to protect patients and staff,” said MacDonell. “We will continue to look at these policies as infection levels improve.”

As a family physician and vice president of medical affairs at Grand Itasca, Dr. Dan Soular sees the importance of paying attention to medical issues as they are in early stages. It’s important to continue to receive primary care, to stay up to date on chronic medical problems which will help someone avoid hospitalizations and emergency room visits, he said.

“For the first time in the last nine months, I finally feel like we are making progress toward an end to the pandemic,” said Dr. Soular. “These vaccines are a new technology, but they have been studied for decades for other diseases. Grand Itasca providers are very confident in their safety and effectiveness.

“Getting out of this pandemic is going to require us to achieve herd immunity, and the beauty of the vaccines, versus natural infection, is that we can avoid harm and death to achieve it.”

“I want to thank our county’s hospitals, public health practitioners and primary care clinics for providing that first line of defense,” said Dr. Dan Margo, co-owner and governing board president of Lakewood Surgery Center. “We are the second line of defense, backing up and supporting the county’s three hospitals. We know there is a plan to keep our regional communities safe and we are here to support them in any way. Early on, we were prepared at Lakewood to convert our operating rooms into intensive care units; thankfully we’re nowhere near needing that.”

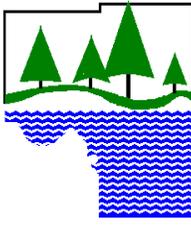
For those seeking COVID testing, call ahead to Essentia Deer River, Scenic Rivers and Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital for details. Also, state-provided tests are available through the National Guard Armory in Hibbing (<https://www.primarybio.com/r/hibbing>) and an at-home test ordered online (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/athome.html>).

If you experience even mild symptoms that resemble a cold or allergies, stay home and seek testing. If you are waiting for COVID test results, stay home. If you have a positive test, your household members also need to quarantine for 14 days from last exposure.

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 – Friday. The Itasca COVID line number is 218-327-6784. Current local data and information also can be found at the county’s website here: <https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/798/COVID-19-Coronavirus-Information>

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Useful Link: [10 tips for online gatherings with family and friends | UMN Extension](https://extension.umn.edu/family-news/10-tips-online-gatherings-family-and-friends#for-adults-and-older-children%2C-expand-beyond-conversation-2656419)
(<https://extension.umn.edu/family-news/10-tips-online-gatherings-family-and-friends#for-adults-and-older-children%2C-expand-beyond-conversation-2656419>)



Note to media: Itasca County Health Department will host 30-minute press briefings on Thursdays at 10:00 a.m. as needed. The next scheduled briefing will be the last week of December (date to be announced). Contact anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us for more information.

Itasca County Public Health media contacts

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