

ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ITASCA RESOURCE CENTER
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COVID VACCINES ARRIVE IN ITASCA COUNTY

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **Dec. 21, 2020**) – Dozens of Bigfork, Deer River and Grands Rapids health care professionals received the county’s first vaccine doses on Dec. 21, with plans for rolling out to the rest of the county as supplies are available.

Cass Lake Hospital, which also serves Itasca residents, was the country’s first Indian health system facility to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, which it provided on Dec. 14 to Leech Lake Band elders and health care professionals.

“It’s a good to see vaccinations rolling,” said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health division director. “We have miles to go before we can rest, but this allow us to see that the path ahead is hopeful. Our most vulnerable will have protection that we haven’t been able to give them so far. As a health care professional, vaccinations are game changers.”

Itasca County continues to see severe cases of COVID-19, although new diagnoses thankfully continue to decline for a second week. New Itasca County cases identified in the past seven days were 129 and in the past 14 days 328. As measured by a 14-day case rate per 10,000 residents, Itasca County’s most current rate is 70.7, down from a high of 129 in November.

Hospitalizations continue to be high for Itasca County and three additional residents have passed away, a man in his 90s and two women in their 80s. Total deaths for Itasca County stand at 33.

“As we enjoy the holidays, we honor with our choices those who have passed away and the many who are still suffering from COVID-19,” said Chandler. “Vaccines will be life-saving, but they are weeks and months away so we’ve got to save lives now by doing what we know works. If you are planning to gather with family or friends, please be extremely aware how easily you can spread the virus and take steps to protect those you love. Wear masks, keep physical distance, open windows, do drive-by drop-offs, meet outdoors, use technology to engage. We can do this!

“By giving the gift of sacrifice, we can imagine a wonderful future with those we love.”



Following the holidays, Itasca County Public Health is working with the Minnesota National Guard to conduct a large community testing event on Jan. 6-8 at Grand Rapids High School. Details, including hours, are forthcoming.

As for vaccination plans, following front-line hospital workers will be ambulance staff, public health staff involved in vaccinations and testing, and EMS-certified firefighters and law enforcement. Itasca County Health will be communicating each phase through Facebook posts, news releases and other tools in development

While guidance from Centers for Disease Control and Minnesota Department of Health continues to evolve, those expected to be next in line for vaccination include 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 COVID until we have a majority of our community fully vaccinated."

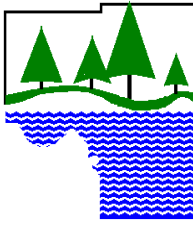
For those seeking COVID testing, call ahead to Essentia Deer River, Scenic Rivers and Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital for details. Also, state-provided tests are available through the National Guard Armory in Hibbing (<https://www.primarybio.com/r/hibbing>) and an at-home test ordered online (<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/athome.h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

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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Note: Local vaccination photos are available by contacting Allison Ahcan, arahcan@blandinfoundation.org or 218-259-2893.



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>)

Media briefing: 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

Kelly Chandler (218-327-6144 and kelly.chandler@co.itasca.mn.us) or Anna Anttila (anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us).