



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

ITASCA RESOURCE CENTER

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

GIVING THE GIFT OF CONNECTION, NOT COVID AND FLU

Itasca COVID rates stuck at high levels, deaths surpass 100

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **Dec. 10, 2021**) – Itasca County is approaching the holidays with very high rates of COVID spread, youth and household anxiety, and stressed health care systems. Getting vaccinated and creating ways to safely connect with others is especially important right now, say local leaders.

Ideas for safer gathering include getting vaccinated or boosted immediately so there's time for your body to build antibodies to COVID. Get a flu shot, as influenza has been identified in our area. Consider quarantining before you go. Keep yourself healthy, with good hand washing and sanitizing, get enough sleep, eat fruits and vegetables, and move your body daily. If you gather, allow enough space to stay six feet apart from others and assure adequate ventilation (outdoor air is best).

At-home test kits are available through local pharmacies (drive-through preferred) or free through the Minnesota Department of Health website. The more thorough PCR COVID tests continue to be available at local clinics.

“We all want to share the gift of connection, not COVID or flu, over the holidays, said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health division manager. “It’s up to us to keep each other safe.”

Kim Geislinger, a mental health provider at Ross Resources, says human connections are going to get us through some of these tough times, especially for kids.

“It was very difficult to have everybody at home – an increase in anxiety, depression and struggles because of that unstructured and screen time that kids had,” said Geislinger. “We know that kids who are connected to caring, competent adults really have such great, bright futures ahead of them. We also know that, as parents, that’s not always us – especially for a teenage child. Teachers, coaches, community providers, faith providers – they are so important in raising good, healthy kids. When we’ve not been able to do that in a face-to-face setting, that’s been a concern. I am super thankful that people are taking precautions so that kids can be in school and that we, as community members, can be out and again engage in some activities together.”

Pastor Patrick Lovejoy of First Lutheran Evangelical Church in Grand Rapids agrees. “It’s important to be able to gather now, and to do it in a respectful way,” he said. “The reality is none of us want to be sick. So, let’s continue to be good stewards of our opportunities and the relationships that we have. And do it in a way that is healthy and in safe environments so that we can celebrate in weeks, months, and years to come.

“Especially this time of year, there is a rise in stress that often erupts in our families and relationships. We need to continue to recenter ourselves, remembering who we are to one another and how important our connections are.”

For those under stress and feeling they need to speak with someone, the Itasca area has a variety of resources. A good place to start is contacting First Call for Help (dial 211) or by texting MN to 741741.

A resident of Deer River, Jessica Setness and her husband had not seen Twin Cities-based family for two years until a visit over Thanksgiving. “COVID took away our opportunities to connect with our extended families,” she said. “But now, we’ve reached a point where, if we take the right precautions, we feel confident connecting with loved ones again.

“We have family members with medical conditions and little ones too young to be vaccinated. And it would absolutely break my heart if I was the cause of getting them sick. So, while we recognize the importance of maintaining connections with family, it is really important that we keep them safe.”

Setness and her husband say they already wear masks at work and in the community and are vaccinated and boosted. Before traveling, they limited exposure to others. On their way down to their family Thanksgiving gathering, they took rapid COVID tests to make sure they weren’t bringing infection.

“The last gift you want to give anyone is COVID-19,” said Setness.

COVID has taken a significant toll on Itasca County this fall. Since Sept. 12, it has claimed the lives of 33 county residents (a pandemic total of 104) and overrun local hospitals. Rates of new infection have stayed high in recent weeks, with a current 14-day rate per 10,000 residents of 97.6. On Dec. 8 alone, more than 40 new infections were diagnosed here.

“This surge has impacted us more than any previous one,” said Dr. Dan Soular, family practice physician and vice president of medical affairs at Grand Itasca Clinic and Hospital. “For the past two months, on average, half of our hospitalized patients were here because of COVID. And because of surging cases everywhere, we continue to care for sicker patients that previously would have been transferred to a larger facility with more specialized equipment and personnel. This is not normal. Because of these struggles, we continue to ask the public to do all they can to prevent getting infected with COVID.

“We ask that you continue to stay home if you are sick, get tested if you have symptoms or are exposed to COVID, and wear masks when appropriate. Vaccines, including for those ages 5-11 continue to be the most effective way of minimizing infections, hospitalizations, and death.

“With the emergence of the new variant known as Omicron, we are learning every day. Vaccines appear to be effective, especially once a booster is completed. Prior infection with COVID alone, however, does not appear to be an effective method of preventing reinfection anymore.

“No one wants this pandemic to go away more than medical professionals. I thank those of you who have done what you can do to keep our communities healthy.”

“Last year at this time, we began to see a significant drop in our case rates, said Chandler. “At that time, there was a lot of mitigation in place—masking, limiting gathering in schools and businesses. And we didn’t have vaccines yet. This year, it is up to us to keep each other safe through our own decisions.”

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.

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