

Letter to the Community: August 7, 2020

Hello Thurston County!

This week Thurston County Public Health and Social Services Department has been receiving many questions. In my letter this week I am going to address some of the questions that have come in.

Who can get severe illness from COVID-19?

While people in every age group including infants and children are at risk for severe disease, most of our severe cases tend to be people who are over 65 years of age. This group tend to have other risk factors including chronic lung disease, serious heart conditions, diabetes, cancer, stroke, and chronic kidney disease.

We have noticed people can become severely ill one week after they first become sick. Difficulty breathing is the most common symptom of severe disease. In many cases, they have been hospitalized and some have required mechanical ventilation to breathe which increases their risk of death. We are still learning more about the other organ systems and processes related to severe COVID-19 disease.

What is in our control with COVID-19?

The most important thing to realize about COVID-19 is that while we can't choose how it affects us or our loved ones, there are a few things about this disease that are within our control. Each one of us can choose the risks we take. Here is a list of things within your control that will help reduce your exposure and other's exposure to the virus:

- Stay at least six feet away from non-household members and wear a face covering
- Avoid social gatherings
- Stay home when you don't feel well
- Get tested quickly
- Cover your cough
- Wash your hands frequently

The second thing we have control over is whether to put other people at risk through potential exposure. If you have been exposed as a close contact, quarantine at home for fourteen days. If you test positive, stay home and isolate away from others for ten days unless directed otherwise by medical personnel is vital.

When one member of a household tests positive there are likely other members who may have the virus. It is important for household members to get tested and quarantine. By following the guidelines we provide for possible exposure or if you have tested positive, it reduces the transmission rate in our community.

What is an outbreak and how do we manage them?

Everyday our Disease Control and Prevention team receives positive COVID-19 test results. When we see a group of people linked by a geographic location who have tested positive, we suspect there may be an outbreak and start an investigation.

The definitions for an outbreak have changed as we have learned more about how people contract the virus. Currently an outbreak at a long-term care facility is declared when one resident or healthcare worker has confirmed COVID-19. For non-healthcare settings, an outbreak is defined as two or more confirmed or probable COVID-19 cases and at least two of the cases have onset dates within 14 days of each other and who share a plausible link in how they contracted the virus in a shared location other than a household. For more details regarding outbreak definitions, please visit the Washington State Department of Health website.

Sometimes we will get a report from a health care provider or employer that they are concerned about an outbreak. The majority of outbreaks are identified through Public Health Disease Control and Prevention staff and their case investigation and contact tracing.

When we receive positive test results, we conduct an investigation. Through this process, we ask where people were during the period of time when they could have been infectious. We use this information to determine who else might be a close contact. A close contact is a person who has been within six feet of an individual for fifteen or more minutes. It's really important if you get a call from a contact tracer or case investigator that you answer their questions! By identifying people who might be exposed or infected and having them get tested, we contain outbreaks and stop the spread of COVID-19. We want to keep everyone in the county safe and healthy.

Current Outbreaks

This week, our department investigated two suspected outbreaks in congregate care facilities in Thurston County. We do not release locations or facility names unless an outbreak poses a risk to the public. We want people in our community to feel safe and to have confidence that our department's team of investigators and contact tracers are working around the clock to protect the health and safety of our community while also safeguarding confidential personal information and abiding by federal and state laws.

I helped facilitate COVID-19 testing of all residents and staff at the impacted facilities, resulting in a confirmed outbreak in a six resident adult family home where two residents and one staff person tested positive. Another outbreak was confirmed in a residential group home. Three residents and nine staff members have tested positive thus far. These new cases contributed to our spike in cases yesterday. The investigation is ongoing and more cases may be identified as a result of testing. These facilities are under quarantine and there is no threat to the general public. We are working with these facilities to contain these outbreaks and control and prevent the further spread of COVID-19. For the latest information on cases and outbreaks, please visit our website.

Please remember to stay home when sick, cover your cough, wear a face covering, maintain 6 feet of distance with non-household members and wash hands frequently. If we all work together, we can prevent outbreaks and keep our community safe and healthy!

Wishing you all the best of health,

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