

Letter to the Community: October 7, 2020

Hello Thurston County! This has been a challenging week for our county as we respond to the COVID-19 pandemic as we have seen our cases increase significantly. The question on everyone's mind has been why? When I see a spike in cases, I look through our charts to see what the cause may be. I started with people who tested positive on September 24, the first day of our spike. There were a number of people who experienced symptoms for three or more days, and in some cases up to a week, before being tested. I believe some individuals delayed testing because of poor air quality from the fires. Many of the earlier cases had traveled both over Labor Day weekend and in the following week. Gatherings of friends and family was another way COVID-19 spread. There were also people who got COVID-19 while they were working. Once one household member was sick, very often other household members would become sick as well. Staying home when you feel sick and getting tested when you have COVID-19 symptoms are essential ways to stop the spread of COVID-19.

It is vital for an entire household to quarantine when one member is sick with COVID-19. People who are sick can be infectious for 10 days (20 days if immunosuppressed) and it is important people isolate themselves from other household members while they are infectious when possible. Quarantine for household members starts the day of their last contact with an individual during their infectious period and lasts 14 days. If another household member gets sick, it restarts the clock for quarantine for the household. Those in continued contact must quarantine for 14 days after the infectious period of the newest case. You can find the CDC guidelines on quarantine here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html>.

I know the rise in cases over the past two weeks is disappointing, but there is hope! If we all stay home when we are sick, get tested soon after symptom onset or when directed by Public Health, stay at least 6 feet from non-household members, wear a mask in public, cover coughs and sneezes, and avoid large gatherings and unnecessary travel, together we can reduce the spread of COVID-19 in our community.

I have also been getting a lot of questions about how to celebrate Halloween safely. There are a lot of fun activities you can do while keeping you and your family safe. Some ideas are a home scavenger hunt or movie marathon with household members, or an online costume/pumpkin carving contest. If you choose to go trick or treating, do it while keeping distance and using face coverings. If you are handing out treats, give treats in individually wrapped treat bags to limit items that would otherwise be touched in a communal bowl. These bags should be placed at some distance from the front door. Placing decorations six feet apart to help trick or treaters keep an appropriate distance is also helpful. As always, wearing a cloth face covering that fully covers the nose and mouth, keeping at least six feet of distance with non-household members, avoiding confined spaces, washing your hands, and staying home if you are sick or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 are key to a safe holiday. You can read the full guidance here:

<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/1600/coronavirus/HalloweenTips.pdf>

Don't forget, it's flu shot season! I just got mine this past weekend and I encourage all of you to do the same. I am very concerned about flu season bringing a rise in respiratory illnesses to our county. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that influenza causes between 12,000 and 61,000 deaths in the United States each year. Getting vaccinated for influenza is a key component to protecting your health this winter. You can find locations to get a flu shot at <https://vaccinefinder.org/find-vaccine>.

I always welcome your health-related questions! Keep them coming to tcphss.pio@co.thurston.wa.us.

Wishing you all the best of health,

Dimyana Abdelmalek, MD, MPH
Thurston County Health Officer