Public Health Agencies respond to New Coronavirus

By Linda Krantz, MS, Coordinated Chronic Disease Program Manager, Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services.

Public health agencies at all levels are responding to a new coronavirus originally identified in Wuhan, a city of 11 million in the Hubei province of China. Since the detection of the virus, currently known as 2019 nCoV, the illness has spread quickly in China resulting in over 20,000 cases and over 400 deaths reported in China as of 2/4/2020. While nearly 30 countries have reported at least one case, including 11 in the United States with direct and indirect links to Wuhan, China appears to be the only area with sustained transmission of the virus at this time.

The virus is closely related to other coronaviruses that have caused past outbreaks, including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 and Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012. At this time, not enough information is available to determine whether the new virus will become well-established and result in broader world-wide spread. However, such spread is considered likely and public health agencies are responding aggressively to slow spread as we try to learn more about the virus.

Recently, the US government enacted quarantine measures targeting returning travelers from mainland China, particularly with an emphasis on those returning from Hubei province. At this time, travelers from the province will undergo a strict 14-day quarantine to monitor for any signs of illness. Travelers from mainland China, but who were not in Hubei province, will have a less strict self-quarantine monitored by local public health officials.

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) is working closely with local public health agencies to prepare for monitoring of travelers and the potential for cases. Currently, only the US CDC can perform testing for this specific virus and only after consultation with local and state public health officials. Public health authorities are stressing the following:

- Stay informed by visiting our web site which includes recent Health Alert Network messages, information on any Montana cases or Patients Under Investigation (PUI) as well as relevant links to important guidelines from the CDC. The site can be reached at: https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/cdepi/diseases/coronavirusmt
- Ensure your facility has contact information, including after-hours contact numbers, for your local public health department. Prompt reporting of any concerns will help with rapid assessment of any patients of concern.
- Review CDC guidance on precautions to take in your settings to prevent this and other respiratory conditions from spreading. Specific guidance on clinical care and infection control practices can be found at: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/hcp/index.html
- Be aware that currently only travelers that have been within mainland China within 14 days of symptom onset or who have been a contact to a known case are patients needing further investigation and reporting to public health authorities. Travel to other international destinations or being in an airport are not considered risks at this time. The CDC and DPHHS web sites will be updated frequently as information changes.
Please contact your local public health department to address any questions or concerns regarding this issue.

Note: Updated information and links to the CDC website are available through https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/cdepi/diseases/coronavirusmt