

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Talking Points for Partners

Last Updated: March 1, 2020

The purpose of this document is to provide public health and healthcare partners with talking points and information that can be used to assist in responding to inquiries from their stakeholders and the media.

GENERAL

- Coronaviruses are a diverse group of different types of viruses, some of which are known to infect humans. There are four common coronaviruses, which are estimated to cause about 25% of common colds in adults world-wide.
- There are also three newer coronaviruses, which have caused outbreaks and more serious disease, including SARS-CoV (2002), MERS-CoV (2012), and this new (novel) coronavirus that was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China in December 2019.
- The global outbreak of respiratory illness caused by this novel coronavirus is rapidly expanding.
- Because the virus is new, the human population has little or no immunity against it. This allows the virus to spread quickly from person to person worldwide.
- This virus has been named “SARS-CoV-2;” the disease it causes has been named COVID-19.
 - Due to potential for confusion with SARS-CoV, where possible, public communications will use “the virus that causes COVID-19.”
- People with COVID-19 can present with a range of symptoms from mild to more severe illness, but most often people report fever, cough, and/or shortness of breath.
- Basic information on COVID-19 including symptoms and transmission is available at:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/index.html>
- While most COVID-19 cases outside of China were initially associated with travel to or from China, community spread is now occurring in a growing number of countries.
- Destinations with widespread or sustained community spread of COVID-19 are identified by having a Level 2 or Level 3 CDC Travel Notice issued (reference list online):
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>
- Other destinations with instances of more limited community spread include those countries with a Level 1 CDC Travel Notice: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>
- For current case counts and a complete listing of countries with identified cases, reference the World Health Organization website:
<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/685d0ace521648f8a5beee1b9125cd>
- The fact that COVID-19 has spread easily from person-to-person and can cause severe illness resulting in hospitalization and even death is concerning and signal the possibility of a global pandemic.

- Individual risk is dependent on the potential for exposure. Currently, the primary risk for infection in the United States is international travel to countries with CDC travel advisories with COVID-19. The current number of infections identified in the United States can be found on the CDC website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-in-us.html>
- CDC expects that more cases will be reported in the United States in the future, including person-to-person spread.

PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

- Public health is working very closely with healthcare providers and other federal, state, and local community partners to respond to this new public health threat.
- The public health response is aggressive and multi-layered, with the goal of reducing the spread and the impact of this virus.
- Over the many years that public health has been responding to emerging infectious diseases, we have developed the infrastructure and close working relationships with healthcare providers and other state and local partners to respond to new infectious disease threats like COVID-19.
- Any new infectious disease threat, however, is going to present its own challenges and we will need to adapt our response as we learn more about COVID-19.
- Health departments and the healthcare system have been preparing for a potential influenza pandemic for many years. Pandemic guidance developed in anticipation of an influenza pandemic is being adapted to respond to a potential COVID-19 pandemic.
- Health departments are operationalizing their pandemic preparedness and response plans, including specific measures to prepare communities to respond to the possibility of local transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19.
- Whereas pharmaceutical interventions like vaccines and antiviral medications are important components of preventing influenza, at this time, there is no vaccine to protect against COVID-19 and no medications approved to treat it.
- Nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) are currently the most important response strategy for COVID-19. NPIs both help contain the spread of disease and reduce the impact of disease.
- The following are current key preparedness and response activities in New Hampshire:
 - Healthcare providers are screening patients for international travel and symptoms of fever or respiratory illness to identify and isolate people with suspected COVID-19.
 - Public health agencies are investigating and facilitating testing for people with suspected COVID-19.
 - Public health agencies are monitoring travelers returning from mainland China.
 - NH DHHS is providing technical guidance and information to healthcare and public health partners through health alerts, written guidance, and webinars.
 - NH DHHS, along with partners, are planning for community transmission in the United States including addressing needs for medical surge, community mitigation, and providing housing, transportation, and services that meet basic needs (e.g. food) for people under isolation or quarantine due to illness or exposure.
 - NH DHHS and partners are informing the public on respiratory disease prevention measures through media interviews, social media posts, and other messaging.

HEALTHCARE SYSTEM PREPAREDNESS

- Like public health agencies, healthcare partners have many plans in place that support preparedness and response to challenges like COVID-19 is presenting.
- These plans address issues such as responding to an increase in patients that may overwhelm the healthcare system and ensuring access to healthcare equipment and supplies.
- Most healthcare facilities have emergency plans and conduct regular training and exercises to test these plans.
- All acute care hospitals in the state have the ability to identify and provide for the initial management of a person suspected to have COVID-19.
- New Hampshire has a healthcare coalition, the Granite State Healthcare Coalition, which is a statewide network of health and safety organizations that work together to enhance emergency preparedness and response capabilities across the health care continuum.
- To prevent overwhelming our healthcare system with people who may have no symptoms or only very mild symptoms, individuals with more mild symptoms should be instructed to follow the personal and environmental NPIs outlined below.
- Any individual who has traveled to a country with sustained or widespread community transmission of COVID-19 and develops symptoms of fever or respiratory illness within 14 days of travel should be instructed to seek healthcare advice by phone from a primary care provider BEFORE going into a provider's office or emergency department.

NONPHARMACEUTICAL INTERVENTIONS

- Nonpharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) are actions, apart from getting vaccinated and taking medicine, that people and communities can take to help slow the spread of illnesses like flu or COVID-19.
- NPIs are also known as community "mitigation" strategies.
- NPIs are among the best ways of controlling a pandemic caused by a respiratory virus when vaccines are not yet available.
- NPIs are grouped in three categories:
 - Personal NPIs: some personal protective measures are for everyday use and others are used during pandemics;
 - Environmental NPIs: surface cleaning measures; and
 - Community NPIs: social distancing measures, including school closures and dismissals, and cancellation of mass gathering events.
- Personal protective measures that all people should follow:
 - Wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
 - Avoid touching eyes, mouth and nose with unwashed hands.
 - Do not to share personal items such as water bottles, smokes and/or vapes.
 - Avoid close contact with individuals who are sick.
 - Stay home when sick. Remain home for at least 24 hours after resolution of fever (without fever-reducing medication) or signs of a fever (i.e., chills, feeling warm, flushed appearance), and respiratory symptoms are improving.
 - Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, then immediately discard the tissue in the trash.
 - Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

- Preemptive school dismissals can be used to disrupt transmission of COVID-19 by reducing close contact before many students and staff members become ill.
- Decisions around community NPIs like school closure would be highly dependent on how/when COVID-19 spreads in New Hampshire and balance potential benefits against potential harms (e.g. lost work and income).
- We cannot predict when COVID-19 will occur here in New Hampshire, or how it will spread.
- NH DPHS is still aggressively working with partners to quickly identify individuals who may have COVID-19 so we can isolate, test, and prevent extensive transmission in our communities.
- While the hope is that community transmission will be limited in NH and that school closures will never be required, NH DPHS recommends that schools take steps to review continuity plans, including plans for the continuity of teaching and learning, in the event that a school closure is necessary for COVID-19.

KEY CONTACTS:

- Individuals with questions about COVID-19 can contact the NH DHHS Bureau of Infectious Disease Control at 603-271-4496 (after-hours 603-271-5300) and ask for the public health nurse on-call.
- Members of the media with questions for NH DHHS should direct inquiries to the NH DHHS Public Information Office at 603-271-9389 or pio@dhhs.nh.gov.

KEY RESOURCES:

- U.S. CDC website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- NH DPHS website: <https://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/cdcs/2019-ncov.htm>