

NEWS RELEASE

September 1, 2021

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Myra Stoney, Health Director, director@swhealth.ne.gov, 308-345-4223

COVID-19 Cases Increasing in Schools and Communities

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) has continued to see an increase in cases of COVID-19 across the health district, particularly in schools. Last year the schools had measures in place that included masking, social distancing, and careful quarantining of exposed individuals. This prevented the rapid spread of COVID-19 among students and staff that they are seeing this year without those measures. There is protection available in the COVID-19 vaccines, yet vaccination rates are low among older students and the younger students are not able to be vaccinated yet.

Several people from SWNPHD's counties have been hospitalized for COVID-19 because they are severely ill. Most of them are healthy individuals that were not immunocompromised or sick with any other conditions before they were hospitalized. "The Delta variant is affecting a wide range of people of all ages. There is a trend of younger people getting seriously ill and needing oxygen support and ventilators that we didn't see with the original COVID strain," states Melissa Propp, Public Health Nurse for SWNPHD. All currently hospitalized patients from SWNPHD are unvaccinated.

SWNPHD asks anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 to please stay at home and avoid contact with others until 10 days from when your symptoms started, especially if you test positive for COVID-19. Heidi Wheeler, Coordinator for the Nebraska Plains Healthcare Coalition, explains, "It is imperative that we protect our hospitals during this wave of the pandemic. The Delta variant is very contagious, and large numbers of people are getting sick at the same time. If even a small percentage of these positive cases need medical care, that is still a huge strain on our healthcare systems in rural Nebraska. All 6 hospitals in SWNPHD are critical care hospitals, meaning they are not intended to care for severely ill patients for long periods of time. When too many people are needing care, there is no room for people who have been injured or have other medical emergencies. There are no beds for them. The larger hospitals that would normally accept these patients are already under a heavy load due to outbreaks in the urban areas. We need people who are sick to stay at home."

On August 30, 2021, Directed Health Measures that restrict elective surgeries and procedures at critical care hospitals were put in place by the state of Nebraska to conserve resources for the increase in COVID-19 patients. There are no Directed Health Measures that limit gatherings or events; however, SWNPHD strongly recommends that residents use caution until cases of COVID-19 begin to decline.

All three COVID-19 vaccines currently approved for use in the US are effectively working to keep people out of the hospital. A small percentage of those who have been vaccinated are testing

positive for COVID-19 but do not get seriously ill.

SWNPHD would like to answer questions that residents have about the COVID vaccines, such as: Will getting a COVID-19 vaccine cause me to test positive for COVID-19 on a viral test? No. According to the CDC, none of the authorized COVID-19 vaccines cause you to test positive on viral tests, which are used to see if you have a current infection. These tests are usually done with a nasal swab. If your body develops an immune response to vaccination, which is the goal, you may test positive on some antibody tests, which are done with a blood draw.

SWNPHD had 70 new cases of COVID-19 reported from August 24th to August 30th, 2021, bringing the weekly average to 59 cases per week in the last 30 days. The total number of cases is 4,225. Vaccination rates across the health district have reached 46%. This number includes fully vaccinated as well as partially vaccinated individuals.

Visit swhealth.ne.gov for information on COVID-19. You can also follow SWNPHD on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. SWNPHD serves Chase, Dundy, Frontier, Furnas, Hayes, Hitchcock, Keith, Perkins, and Red Willow counties. SWNPHD is located at 404 West 10th St (1 block north of Arby's) in McCook and can be reached by calling 308-345-4223.

###