

County tells residents to prepare for coronavirus

February 27, 2020



A note on the coronavirus from Dr. Warren Rehwaldt, Del Norte County Public Health Officer:

The news from around the world this last week has convinced most in public health the new coronavirus (virus name: SARSCoV2, disease name: COVID-19) will become a problem in the U.S. Some experts believe it is already in the U.S. but has not “surfaced” yet.

In either case, the U.S. is moving toward domestic management and now is the time for Del Norte residents to begin preparing for this likely event. The whole story on how this virus behaves in people—transmission spread and rate, how long it lasts, and who is most at risk—may not be known entirely for months or years. But we are starting to accumulate data from China and other parts of the world.

Here’s what we know so far:

Transmission: This virus behaves a lot like cold and flu viruses in terms of moving from one person to another. It is spread mostly by droplets (wet sneezes and coughs are the worst source of “droplets,” tiny drops of mucous with many virus particles inside). You may also hear the words “aerosolized transmission,” which basically means extreme microscopic sized droplets.

The person being infected breathes the virus in, or the virus lands on “mucous membranes,” the inside of the mouth, nose, throat, part of the eye or anywhere in the lungs. The vast majority of cases are probably caught this way.

The other way is by touch. A droplet from someone else’s cough could land on a surface and you touch it. If you rub your eye, nose, or wipe your mouth with that hand, you might infect yourself.

Infection: People are likely most infectious while having symptoms (fever, coughing, sneezing, body aches, etc.) People may be infectious slightly before and for a while after having symptoms, or while they have such light symptoms that they don't really think they are ill.

Severity and those susceptible: At least 80% of the time (and in reality, this percentage is probably much higher) this virus causes a mild infection, more like a cold than the flu, maybe lasting longer than usual. Children have had a very low rate of infection, and the cases have been very mild.

The remaining cases are worse, and some people get sick enough to be hospitalized. The main reason people are hospitalized is because of pneumonia. Some hospitalized people may die—this is happening primarily to the same categories of persons other kinds of pneumonia affects: the elderly, people with serious lung disease and serious chronic illness and people whose immune systems don't work well.

The overall rate of dying from this virus is maybe as high as 3% (and is probably much lower), but if you get sick enough to land in the hospital, the chance of dying may be as high as 10-12% or more. For perspective, the overall chance of dying from pneumonia in the hospital under ordinary circumstances is between 5-20%.

The problem with a new virus like this is almost everyone is likely to be infected. If it gets established in a community, a lot of people could get sick all at once. When that happens, hospitals and clinics get overwhelmed. That is what has happened in Wuhan, and why the Chinese have gone to such great lengths to slow the virus from spreading.

The extraordinary measures they have taken, essentially closing down the city and demanding people stay home, seem extreme, but also seem to be working. The case counts in Wuhan have finally started to taper off. It is time for our community to start considering what actions may need to be taken and especially what people here in Del Norte County can do on their own to mimic what has been successful elsewhere.

The key thing is for people and families to have a plan for themselves—to be able to stay home, stay away from the public, yet still get the service and support they need. In public health, this is called “social distancing.”

Here are some things you can do to protect yourself and others:

Social distancing for the ill or “at risk”: If you are sick, stay home. Continue to stay home until you are completely well. If you are caring for someone who is sick, stay home, but do everything you can to keep yourself healthy. If you get sick as well, absolutely stay home too.

If you are a high risk person—very old, chronically ill, or your immunity is down—you can also stay home, and limit or avoid contact with anyone. If you are sick and have to go out, wear a mask. If you don't have a mask, wear a scarf or some other conventional covering for your face.

Part of the effect of a mask is just letting people know you are sick, so they can stand back and make space for you. Generally, six feet or more is considered a safe zone distance. If you need to go to the doctor

because you are feeling ill with cold or flu symptoms, call ahead and let them know you are coming. If you are well but are an “at risk” person and need to go to the doctor for other reasons, call and ask if there are special times or a back door that you can use since a waiting room with sick people in it may not be a good option for you.

If you are well, here are some simple measures you can take: Follow flu rules. Wash hands frequently, especially after touching objects other people could have touched. Wash surfaces in your home you and others touch, such as door and cupboard knobs, switches and faucets handles, counters and tables. Use cleaners that “kill germs.” Cover your coughs and sneezes. If you use a tissue, dispose of it so nobody else touches it. Use hand sanitizer (60% alcohol or higher is preferred).

If you need to go out, plan a time when there are fewer people out and about, such as early morning or late at night for groceries or the post office. Think twice about attending social events and if you do go, try to keep three to six feet between you and others. Replace handshakes and hugs for a while with bows, nods and waves. Do not kiss babies.

Should steps be taken to make social distancing mandatory by legal order, schools might be closed, public events canceled, even entire communities quarantined. We may or may not see some of this by order of state and federal authorities in the next few months, depending upon how the situation develops here in the United States.

There are things that you can do to prepare for that also: Stock up. When you go for groceries, set aside a few extra items in case you must shelter in place (everyone in Del Norte should have a disaster kit anyway that will sustain them for two weeks or more). Items don’t need to be expensive - buy rice, oatmeal, canned goods, noodles, etc.

Figure out now who you can call on for assistance if you get ill, and find as many people as you can for this. You don’t know who might be sick when you call. Be willing to reciprocate if you are able.

These actions work best when everyone pitches in and follows the rules. All of these things also help with flu prevention, and we are still in the middle of a serious flu season. So far this year over 14,000 people have died in our nation because of the flu.

Even if our leaders don’t decide to enact any of these things, these measures will still help. We don’t have a vaccine for this virus, and no drugs that we can use—even our testing of cases is very limited. This virus may get to our community long before any of those conditions change, so we need to fall back to old-fashioned common sense measures that have worked for years.

These measures aren’t exciting, but they are very important to preventing the spread of illness. Anything we can do to prevent loved ones from getting sick (especially those who are at risk of getting a serious infection from this virus) is well worth all our efforts.

If you have questions, please refer to the CDC website, cdc.gov/covid19, or for local updates, visit Del Norte County Public Health’s website at bit.ly/2019-nCOV or call 707-464-0861.

