

Public Health preps for possibility of measles outbreak

Wyoming counties count cases during tourism season

By ALEX HARGRAVE

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In light of a Teton County measles outbreak, Johnson County's public health nurse manager, Kristin Friedrich, said that it's possible Johnson County could see an outbreak locally.

"We never rule things out," she said in an interview. "We have a lot of tourists who come through Buffalo, whether they stay here or fill up the gas tank, measles is highly contagious."

Measles is particularly contagious even before those who are infected start to feel symptomatic, Friedrich said.

"So people don't realize they have measles and they're out and about doing their thing," she said. "That's part of the reason it is so contagious. All it would take is one person and we could have a measles outbreak here. We don't rule it out."

The county's rate of vaccination against measles, however, is cause for optimism, she said. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people receive two doses of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine, typically first at 12 to 15 months old and again at 4 to 5 years old.

Friedrich said that according to Wyoming Department of Health data, 96% of Johnson County residents who are 13 to 17 years old received their MMR vaccine as of last year. And in 2023, 93% of kindergarteners had up-to-date MMR vaccinations. To achieve

herd immunity against measles, 93% to 95% of a population must be immune, she said.

"That's a pretty good coverage rate," Friedrich said. "... The measles vaccine is highly effective. We very much encourage everyone who is eligible to get their measles vaccine if they haven't yet, because measles is a doozy of a disease. It can cause some pretty severe illness."

Johnson County's outsized senior population is also good news in terms of measles immunity. Friedrich said that anyone born before 1957 is presumptively immune to measles, because they were alive for a previous outbreak.

"Considering we have a pretty big senior community, I'd assume that's a good number of us," Friedrich said. "Looking at these numbers, we do have some good prevention measures on our side."

The Wyoming Department of Health reported the first case of measles in Teton County on June 28 in what would become a larger outbreak. The adult was unvaccinated, according to a news release from the agency.

As of July 15, the most up-to-date data available from the department, there are 6 measles cases in Wyoming, including 5 in Teton County and 1 in Fremont County.

In its communications on measles cases, the state health department includes the dates, times and locations that infected individuals were in public spaces, because measles are highly contagious and people on-site at the time may have been exposed to the virus. In Teton County, potential exposure sites include indoor locations at Grand Teton National Park and grocery stores in Jackson.

"We are asking people who may

have been exposed to watch for measles symptoms for 21 days past the exposure date and consider avoiding crowded public places and high-risk settings such as day-care centers," Alexia Harrist, State Health Officer with the Wyoming Department of Health, said in a statement.

The health department recommends all residents ensure that they and their children are up-to-date on MMR vaccines. Monitoring for symptoms is especially important for individuals who are not vaccinated against MMR, the news release says.

Babies who are too young to get vaccines, pregnant women who are not immune and people with weak immune systems are more likely to experience serious illness, including pneumonia, encephalitis, hospitalization and death if infected.

Measles symptoms include fever, cough, runny nose, red or watery eyes and a rash that starts on the face and spreads over the body. The health department recommends contacting a health care provider for guidance if you experience symptoms.

"Calling ahead in non-emergency situations helps prevent additional exposures," the department news release says. "If you have symptoms of measles, stay home and avoid contact with others unless you are getting healthcare."

Johnson County Public Health can administer the MMR vaccine to residents, regardless of whether they are insured. Friedrich said that if there is an exposure in the county, her office will conduct contact tracing to determine additional exposures and will communicate with the public.

"If we do see it here, it's something we'll keep a very close eye on," she said.