

Local health care providers keeping up to date on coronavirus

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NEWS EDITOR

The Wuhan strain of the coronavirus may not ever spread to Umatilla County, but health officials are prepared for it anyway.

The respiratory virus has mostly been spreading in China. The National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases said on Jan. 27 they were monitoring more than 100 potential cases in the United States. But only 11 of those cases had been confirmed as of Monday afternoon.

Pam Schulz, infection control program manager at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston, said anyone coming into the emergency room with a fever or respiratory symptoms is being screened to see if they were recently somewhere with reported cases of the Wuhan coronavirus.

"We ask the question, 'Have you traveled recently, and if so, where?'" she said.

If the patient has a cough, they're given a mask. If their symptoms are such that they can't handle breathing through a mask, the staff puts on masks of their own and the patient gets "tucked away" somewhere away from others in the waiting room.

The coronavirus is part of a family of viruses that range from the common cold to much more serious diseases like MERS, the Middle East Respiratory



A warning affixed to a mask and hand sanitizer station in the lobby of St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton advises people, who have recently traveled outside of the United States, to let hospital staff know immediately if they are experiencing fever, cough and shortness of breath.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Syndrome that has killed approximately 35% of people who catch it. There is no cure or vaccine, just treatment of symptoms.

"You just pay attention to the symptoms and protect them and protect yourself," Schulz said.

Steve Hardin, emergency room director at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton, said hospitals have received direction that people should be tested for coronavirus only if they have had a fever or short-

ness of breath in the past 14 days, have not tested positive for the flu, and have either traveled to Wuhan or had direct contact with a confirmed case of the virus in the past 14 days.

"We have signs up saying, 'If you have been to Wuhan, China, in the last 14 days, tell us,'" he said.

Coronaviruses are common. According to WebMD, most people have gotten a coronavirus before in the form of a cold. However, the Wuhan coronavirus

has in some cases presented with more severe symptoms, such as shortness of breath, pneumonia and kidney failure.

If China's reporting of the new strain of the virus, first reported on Dec. 30, 2019, in Wuhan, is accurate, as of Monday there had far been more than 17,000 confirmed cases and 361 deaths there, according to the New York Times.

That's a higher mortality rate than the flu, but Hardin pointed out that peo-

ple in the United States are far more likely to get the flu, and the flu is expected to kill more people overall. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that since Oct. 1, 2019, between 8,200 and 20,000 people have died from the flu in the United States.

"Influenza is not very sexy, but it kills a lot of people every year," Hardin said.

He encouraged people to get vaccinated against the flu. Other advice Hardin and Schulz gave for not catching or spreading the flu is the same advice for avoiding the Wuhan coronavirus and other respiratory viruses: wash your hands, don't touch your face, cover your cough, avoid sick people, and stay home if you're the one who is sick.

"It's basic hygiene," Schulz said.

Alicia Southwick, director of Umatilla County Public Health, said the county health department had been working closely with the Oregon Health Authority to stay up to date with accurate information about the Wuhan coronavirus and preventative measures. Nicole Breuner from the health department said she has been working to distribute that information to area health providers.

"As of right now passengers from China are being screened, which has been incredibly effective in the past," she said.

Breuner and Southwick also encouraged people to wash their hands thoroughly with soap for at least 20 seconds, or if that isn't possible to use hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol.

Breuner said the health department is there to support physicians, and encouraged them to give her a call at 541-278-5432 if they have any questions.

On Wednesday, Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., joined Sen. Todd Young, R-Ind., in sending a letter to the World Health Organization to declare a "public health emergency of international concern." The declaration could allow the WHO to take measures, such as travel restrictions and incentivizing aid.

"The WHO neglected to declare two earlier coronavirus epidemics, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), as public health emergencies of international concern," the senators wrote. "Meanwhile, according to WHO statistics, SARS resulted in 813 confirmed deaths and MERS resulted in 858. We hope that this time the determination will not be overdue."

The WHO did declare an emergency later that day. The last time it declared an emergency was in 2019 for an Ebola outbreak in the Congo.

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