

Our Vision: Healthy People in Healthy Communities Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties

For Immediate Release: Friday, April 7, 2023
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COVID-19 continues to impact our communities; bivalent booster is still best answer

Hastings, Neb –South Heartland District Health Department (SHDHD) executive director Michele Bever reported moderate virus levels in local wastewater, ongoing needs for hospital care in patients with severe illness, another reported death attributed to COVID-19, and updated recommendations for bivalent booster eligibility.

The most recent wastewater surveillance report for Hastings samples collected on March 28 shows moderate, stable levels of the virus that causes COVID-19. Health director Bever said that moderate levels in the wastewater means that there are moderate numbers of people in the community who are infected with the virus.

“With the virus continuing to circulate in the community, people who are at higher risk for severe illness, but also those living, working and interacting with others who are more vulnerable to severe illness, should continue to take precautions against the spread of this respiratory virus that has been with us now for over three years. Staying up to date on vaccinations is one of these precautions,” Bever said.

“I want to also point out that it is not just a matter of the risk of severe illness that should be considered. Long-COVID symptoms can occur in anyone who has been infected, regardless of the severity of their illness.”

A recent research brief published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that 90% of people living with Long COVID initially experienced only mild illness with COVID-19. According to the study, Long COVID symptoms included “persistent fatigue with bodily pain or mood swings; cognitive problems; or ongoing respiratory problems three months after symptomatic SARS-CoV-2 infection.”

“Therefore, ongoing protection against infection is important to prevent severe illness, hospitalization and death, but also to reduce risk of Long-COVID,” Bever said.

SHDHD’s analysis of data for the month of March showed that 92% of patients hospitalized in South Heartland hospitals due to COVID-19 illness were either not vaccinated or not up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines. Bever also reported another COVID-19-attributed death was added to the South Heartland count – for a new total of 158. The death occurred last year but was recently confirmed by Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NE DHHS) death certificate record.

Bever urged residents to get their bivalent COVID-19 booster vaccines. She emphasized that data from NE DHHS showed that Nebraskans who were vaccinated with the bivalent booster vaccine were 17 times less likely to die of COVID-19 compared with those who are not vaccinated. “The NE DHHS data also shows that for 2022, COVID-19 was the 3rd leading cause of death in Nebraska, after heart disease and cancer; and Nebraskans are more likely to die of COVID-19 than of a stroke,” she said.

Janis Johnson, a registered nurse and South Heartland’s immunization manager said that there are not yet any additional new COVID-19 booster shots approved for individuals who have already received a bivalent COVID-19 booster. However, there were recent changes in eligibility for the bivalent booster for everyone aged 6 months to 5 years.

“The CDC currently recommends one bivalent COVID-19 booster dose for everyone aged 6 months and older. The bivalent booster dose must be given at least 2 months following the monovalent primary doses (and after any monovalent booster dose received). These updated recommendations from March 21, 2023 may be accessed here: <https://www.webmd.com/vaccines/covid-19-vaccine/news/20230321/fda-approval-of-second-covid-booster-may-be-near-report-says>.

Johnson urged residents who are not up to date to choose to get vaccinated now. “The bivalent booster is still free and continues to be readily available across the district,” she said.

SHDHD offers walk-in access to free COVID-19 vaccine primary series and free bivalent boosters from 12:00 pm – 4:00 pm on the second and fourth Wednesdays of April (April 12 and April 26).

For other locations offering COVID-19 vaccine in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties, refer to the SHDHD website, southheartlandhealth.ne.gov, or call the health department office, 1-877-238-7595.

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