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For Immediate Release

Monongalia County Health Department receives first doses of COVID vaccine

MORGANTOWN, WV (Dec. 15, 2020) — Monongalia County Health Department received doses of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 on Tuesday and began vaccinating employees and EMS staff who have direct contact with members of the public.

“We have been on the front line of this viral pandemic since March, especially since we began conducting free community COVID-19 testing,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, MCHD executive director and county health officer.

“We are grateful to have an opportunity to begin providing protection to our employees and other front-line members of the health-care team, as well as participate in what we believe will be the biggest and best weapon in the fight against the COVID pandemic.”

MCHD has ordered sub-zero freezers that will keep the Pfizer COVID vaccine at minus 70 degree Celsius and delivery is expected later in December. In the meantime, MCHD’s vaccines are being stored at WVU Medicine’s Ruby Memorial Hospital. MCHD will also have additional refrigerator storage for other vaccines when they become available.

Each Pfizer vaccine vial holds five doses and everyone who receives a vaccine will need a second dose 21 days later. The frozen vaccine needs to be thawed and reconstituted with saline to be administered, and then those five doses must be injected within six hours.

“When we start giving out one vaccine, we need five people lined up and ready to go,” Dr. Smith said. “This has required a lot of education and planning on our part so we are ready to provide the vaccine without wasting any doses.”

Delivery of doses to MCHD is expected to continue on a weekly basis, with hundreds of doses expected by the end of December. In addition to MCHD employees, vaccines from the health department's stock also are being given to Monongalia County's EMS workers in this first round.

"We expect to be in a position to begin vaccinating the general public very soon," Dr. Smith said. "We are currently making plans for locations and logistics of this important endeavor."

Jennifer Goldcamp, RN, MCHD Clinical Services' program manager, has been attending phone meetings with officials from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources and taking webinars from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Pfizer in order to learn about receiving, storing and administering the vaccine, as well as follow-up protocols.

"Once we give this vaccine to an individual, that person will be monitored for 15 minutes for any reactions or side effects," she said.

The vaccines are given in the upper arm, or deltoid muscle, similar to influenza vaccines. They will be free to the individual, although MCHD will attempt to defray costs by charging Medicare, Medicaid or insurance for administration fees.

Individuals should feel very safe getting the vaccine, Dr. Smith added, noting that this vaccine cannot give you COVID-19. "You're not getting the whole virus, like in a polio vaccine. You're only getting one protein. That appears to be sufficient exposure for your body's immune system to generate antibodies."

In vaccine trials, some common side effects experienced by individuals were similar to those of a flu shot: pain and swelling at the injection site, or fever, chills, fatigue and headache.

"From what we understand, for those who had side effects, they generally came on quickly and then resolved in a day," Dr. Smith said.

The Pfizer vaccine is a messenger RNA vaccine, or mRNA. According to the CDC, this is different from older vaccines that utilized a weakened or inactivated germ. The mRNA vaccines instead teach cells how to make a protein, or even just a piece of a protein, that triggers an immune response inside our bodies.

"These vaccines are a wonderful illustration of the strides scientists have made in recent years when it comes to creating vaccines," Dr. Smith said. "This technology has been in

development for years, so while these vaccines were created in an unprecedented short period of time, the science behind them is not new.”

Great Britain was actually the first country to start giving its citizens the Pfizer vaccine, with an effort that began on Dec. 8, three days before the FDA granted Pfizer emergency use approval (EUA) in the United States.

Doctors there quickly learned that two individuals with allergies experienced an anaphylactic reaction, although they are now fine. Anyone with similar issues might want to consult with their primary care physician before getting mRNA vaccines. Vaccines made through more traditional methods are also in the pipeline to be submitted for emergency use approval in the near future.

“While anaphylactoid reactions are rare, vaccine administration sites will be equipped and ready to deal with these problems,” Dr. Smith said.

The CDC also has a cell phone app called V-Safe that will track possible reactions. Persons experiencing any serious side effects should seek immediate medical attention and their symptoms reported to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS).

One question that has emerged as the public learns more about the vaccine is whether mask usage will still be necessary for individuals once they are inoculated.

The short answer to that is, “Yes, absolutely,” and for a few reasons.

“Because this is a two-dose vaccine taken three weeks apart, individuals will not have full protection against contracting COVID-19 until weeks after receiving the second dose,” Dr. Smith said. “Persons only having the first of the two-vaccine series may still contract COVID-19. It should be remembered that no vaccine has an absolute guarantee.”

Also, the CDC is estimating that the country needs to vaccinate at least 60% of the population in order to achieve herd immunity that will protect all citizens.

“It will take several months to get that many individuals vaccinated and for them to achieve the full protection the vaccine offers,” Dr. Smith said.

In the meantime, COVID-19 cases continue to surge in the country, the state and in Monongalia County. On Tuesday, Monongalia County had 1,375 active COVID cases. That’s a third of all county cases — 4,256 — since the first one was announced on March 19.

Additionally, just in the past seven days, Monongalia County has reported 518 new cases. The state reported 34 new COVID-related deaths on Tuesday, bringing the total to 1,012, as well as a statewide daily positivity rate of 9.61%.

“We’ve been in surge mode since early November, and since Thanksgiving, it’s only getting worse,” Dr. Smith said. “We know arrival of vaccines is an exciting development for people, who are understandably tired of this pandemic. But it’s important to remain vigilant with mask wearing, social distancing and hand washing for the foreseeable future.”

The CDC’s website features a great deal of information on the vaccine at cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/index.html.

For up-to-date information on health and wellness in Monongalia County, check out monchd.org and follow the health department on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at #wvmchd.