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## **For Immediate Release**

### ***Monongalia County has nearly 200 COVID-19 variant cases so far; caution still urged***

**MORGANTOWN, WV (April 12, 2021)** — As of April 9, Monongalia County Health Department was following nearly 200 COVID-19 variants of concern, including more than 32 cases of the United Kingdom (U.K.) variant [B.1.1.7], and 164 cases of the California variant, which has two mutations [B.1.427/B.1.429].

Ninety percent of West Virginia’s California variant cases are in Monongalia County, while one-third of the state’s U.K variant cases are here.

“These variants of concern are both more infectious, and the U.K. variant is associated with an increased risk of death,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, MCHD executive director and county health officer.

“These mutations occur on the outside of the virus and change the way they adhere to human cells, but do not change how the virus behaves. This means the illness looks the same but may be more severe,” he added.

However, scientists do not yet fully know how the California variant will impact people.

“What is clear is that we are seeing infections in children down to age 6,” Dr. Smith said. “Unfortunately, this is just a partial snapshot, as we are only doing a small number of genetic tests, including those who are now experiencing a second COVID-19 infection, those with infection following vaccination, and other random samples.”

That means that health officials do not know the extent of these infections in the community.

“However, we do know that the number of infections is increasing quickly,” Dr. Smith said.

There is good news, Dr. Smith noted. “Vaccination helps reduce risk of infection, severity of illness, chance of hospitalization and possibility of death from COVID-19.”

As of April 9, around 60,000 COVID-19 vaccines had been administered by Monongalia County Health Department as well as at the Greater Monongalia County COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic at the old Sears building at the Morgantown Mall. That includes 37,326 first doses and 22,544 second doses.

So while it feels like there might be a light at the end of the tunnel in the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as the weather warms up and summer approaches, the variants, especially the more infectious and deadly U.K. version, are a good reason to keep up COVID-19 safety measures.

“People still need to wear masks, even if they have been vaccinated,” Dr. Smith said. “And they should be cautious in other ways, by socially distancing when not around individuals with whom they live, washing their hands often and using common sense when they go out in public and engage in activities.”

He added, “Please do not cast all caution to the wind and hope for the best. Now is not the time to let your guard down.”

Two other known variants, Brazil [P.1] and South Africa [B.1.351], have not been discovered in Monongalia County.

According to information on the CDC’s website, “These variants have mutations in the virus genome that alter the characteristics and cause the virus to act differently in ways that are significant to public health.”

That means that a variant “causes more severe disease, spreads more easily between humans, requires different treatments and changes the effectiveness of current vaccines.”

Dr. Diane K. Gross, MCHD regional epidemiologist, noted some differences between the two variants found in Monongalia County.

“This U.K. variant is estimated to be 50% more transmissible and more severe than the ‘original’ virus,” she said. “The California variants are estimated to be 20% more

transmissible, with no change in severity. However, they may be more likely to evade our immune defenses from natural infection or from vaccination.

“So the California variant may not spread as much as the U.K. variant, but it may be more likely to infect someone who had the virus previously or who was vaccinated.”

Existing variants and potential for additional ones is also a reason why MCHD still recommends that individuals who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 quarantine for 14 days instead of a shorter amount of time.

“We have been consistent since the beginning of this pandemic,” Dr. Smith said. “The only exception is where those employed suffer economic hardships. That’s the person who endures hardship from not being able to go to work.”

Also, West Virginia COVID-19 cases, hospital admissions and deaths have been on the rise again. After not exceeding 400 cases since late February, the daily state COVID-19 count reached 433 on March 25 and 566 on March 27. On April 9, the state Department of Health and Human Resources announced 479 new cases. There also have been 61 deaths reported statewide in the first nine days of April.

Right now, testing and vaccines remain the best public health tools in the arsenal to fight COVID-19. MCHD conducts testing on most Mondays and Fridays from 9 to 11 a.m. at the WVU Rec Center.

“We want to emphasize that testing is still very important, even though many individuals are focused on vaccines now,” Dr. Smith said. “The estimate is that about 40% or more of people who have COVID-19 don’t have symptoms. And individuals are contagious before they develop symptoms. So even if you aren’t having symptoms, it’s a good idea to periodically know what your COVID-19 status is.”

Also, Gov. Jim Justice has announced that anyone 16 or older can get a COVID-19 vaccine. Vaccine administration at the Greater Monongalia County COVID-19 Clinic has been ramped up to three to four clinics a week for the next month.

“There really is no excuse for most people in this age group to not get a vaccine,” Dr. Smith said. “Not only will you help protect yourself, your friends and your family, but it also helps the community achieve herd immunity against COVID-19. It will also help in the fight to keep these new variants at bay.”

Individuals are now able to make a vaccine appointment directly at [Vaccine.WVUMedicine.org](http://Vaccine.WVUMedicine.org). Testing days and times can be found at MCHD's website, [monchd.org](http://monchd.org) and on the health department's Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages.

“More than three months ago, when we started vaccinating the public, most people had to be placed on a list,” Dr. Smith said. “We’re happy to report that getting a vaccine now is as easy as going online, selecting a time and day and arriving at the clinic, which has been set up to be an efficient system for inoculating the public.”

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

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