VERNON COUNTY AND VERNON MEMORIAL HEALTHCARE PREPAREDNESS FOR COVID-19

(Viroqua, WI, 3/11/2020) - Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is making world headlines, but how does it affect us on a local level and what are local health officials doing to prepare for the possibility of this new virus hitting our communities?

Beth Johnson, Registered Nurse and Director, Vernon County Health Department said, “This virus is something we’ve never seen before and information is continuing to develop, so what we focus on collectively as community health officials is preparation.”

While Wisconsin still only has a handful of confirmed cases, the World Health Organization on March 10 declared this a pandemic. Vernon Memorial Healthcare (VMH) has a large, well-organized team that is well into preparing for a potential outbreak in our area. The VMH COVID-19 Preparedness Committee includes VMH Providers and Staff, Vernon County Health Department, and representatives from Gundersen Clinic – Viroqua. David Hartberg, VMH Chief Executive Officer said, “We’ve got all the right people at the table, working collaboratively and being proactive as we check the boxes of what we may need in the event that COVID-19 comes to our community. As we discuss the unknowns of the COVID-19 virus specifically, we’re also solidifying the policies and procedures we already have in place as an organization. We are continually basing our decisions on the best available science.”

Kickapoo Valley Medical Clinic–VMH, Medical Director, Dr. Joel Charles, M.P.H. is equipped to Co-chair the COVID-19 Preparedness Committee with a Masters of Public Health. He said, “While it is a new virus, COVID-19 is the type of communicable disease that you learn about and prepare for because it is inevitable with how we live as a society. Humans are unavoidably social creatures so at this stage, our public message is that if you’re sick you should minimize your contact with others (don’t go to work or school or other public places) and if you are elderly or have other medical issues, minimize your contact with large groups of people in general and specifically with people who are sick.

Recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have provided a list of proper steps to prevent illness on their website. Handwashing being one of the most
important, VMH Infection Prevention Coordinator, Romelle Heisel said, “We may sound like a broken record, but we can’t emphasize enough the necessity of not touching your face, covering your cough, and washing your hands with soap and water or 60% alcohol hand sanitizer. Do that frequently and be diligent of making sure you’re taking a solid 20 seconds to scrub and be sure to get under those fingernails as well!”

Health care organizations take following recommended CDC guidelines for infection prevention and identifying a person of investigation (PUI) very seriously because with communicable diseases like COVID-19, there is a high risk for patients who are elderly or otherwise ill. “The importance of prevention is obviously to protect the community and our staff from getting sick, but also just as important, we want to stop the spread to protect our highest risk patients. This is why we’re encouraging people to call their medical facility before coming in if they have respiratory symptoms or fever,” Dr. Charles said. “As a health care organization, we need to make sure those patients with respiratory illness are directed to the appropriate setting for the best care, while continuing to see our non-infectious, but elderly or chronically ill patients who may have compromised immune systems due to other underlying health issues, so we’re trying to eliminate cross contamination to those individuals especially.”

When patients are calling their medical facility, they should expect to answer questions like:

- Do you have a fever and/or signs of lower respiratory illness (e.g. cough or shortness of breath)?
- Do you have other medical conditions such as heart, kidney, or lung disease, or cancer?
- Have you traveled to COVID-19 affected areas (e.g. China, Iran, Italy, Japan, South Korea, or any other affected areas within the U.S. like Washington, New York, or California)?
- Have you been in contact with someone that has tested positive for COVID-19?

If COVID-19 reaches our communities proper steps to stop the spread of the virus are also being discussed. Johnson said, “Something the public may not know is that we as health officials do a lot of work behind the scenes before anything like this ever arises, so we’re always working on ways to protect the public, as well as our health care workers. Our priority to the public if this does reach our community is to emphasize the importance of containment and self-quarantine if sick. Simply put, that means if you have infectious symptoms but don’t require care, don’t go out in the public, stay home!”
When the statement containment or self-quarantine is discussed, the worry of ‘but I have to go to work’ occurs. The VMH COVID-19 Preparedness Committee is developing the plan of what it means if the need occurs to have a limited workforce. Hartberg said, “As an employer, we’re taking preparative steps very seriously. We’re planning for how our non-clinical employees could possibly work remotely if the need arises, as well as the plan for our clinical side and what that means to continue to provide the best care to our communities.” Hartberg continued, “With the cooperation of Vernon County Health Department, we’ve recently sent correspondence out to other community partners and business leaders to encourage them to allow for their staff/students to stay home if they show any respiratory symptoms or fever. Many U.S. businesses are planning for implementing a remote workforce when possible, though those recommendations would come from public health.”

“This isn’t a way to have a couple days off of work, this is a serious step we’re taking and requesting of our community partners in business in an effort to help mitigate the spread of this virus. We understand it isn’t easy to have a limited workforce, but it really is something we need to come together to support and develop as best we can so we can stop the spread of not only COVID-19, but also other non-related, but highly communicable diseases like Influenza and stomach viruses.” Johnson said.

Preparatory steps are being discussed and planned for with the question of where do individuals that possibly have the virus go if they are in need of medical attention? “We have a plan in place when that occurs. It would include isolating those patients from others while providing them the best care, keeping our health care workers safe through proper procedures, and a specific plan for cleaning the area after each patient,” Dr. Charles said. “With that said, we would still enforce the ‘call before you show’ protocol because there may be some patients that would be able to self-quarantine and recover without medical intervention.”

“I can assure you that even though we’re finding new information out daily, sometimes hourly, about COVID-19 from our reputable health resources [CDC and WI-DHS], we’re taking the appropriate steps to make sure our communities and our staff are taken care of,” Hartberg said. “Yes, this situation holds many unknowns, but what we do know is that we have many incredibly intelligent and capable people at the table planning and keeping this top of mind as we continue regular operations at VMH of providing quality care to our patients.”

For local questions or concerns related to COVID-19 (not specific to patient care) please contact Vernon County Health Department: (608) 637-5251. If you are outside of Vernon County, please contact your local health department.

For questions regarding patient care related to COVID-19, please contact the VMH Nurse Hotline at (608) 637-4990.