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State continues to monitor COVID-19 variant viruses

State lab adds clinical surveillance to variant virus monitoring

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JEFFERSON CITY, MO – As COVID-19 case rates and positivity rates in Missouri continue to steadily decline, Dr. Randall Williams, director of the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS), notes that the unpredictability of emerging variants is a good reason to continue infection prevention precautions.

"While Missouri has only one confirmed case of a patient with the UK variant, we understand this variant is more widespread in the United States and Missouri than detected by clinical and sentinel testing," said Williams. "We want to reiterate just the importance of washing your hands and using masks if you can't social distance as more variants are detected. We hope all Missourians will consider being vaccinated as vaccines become more available."

To further enhance the public health surveillance for variant SARS-CoV-2 viruses, Missouri healthcare providers can submit specimens from eligible individuals to the Missouri State Public Health Laboratory (MPSHL), **if approved as appropriate for variant surveillance. (https://health.mo.gov/emergencies/ert/alertsadvisories/pdf/update21921.pdf)**

As part of a national variant monitoring program, the Missouri State Public Health Laboratory had been sending samples to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) every two weeks. Additionally, samples that had been indicating potential virus variants have been sent from the State to the regional public health reference laboratory in Minnesota for sequencing.

DHSS will consider requests for testing from providers when certain requirements and criteria are met. Testing capacity is for public health surveillance and is therefore limited. The new capabilities will be supported through a partnership with the University of Missouri to provide bioinformatic analysis.

"We are fortunate that we are now able to implement these sequencing capabilities right here in our laboratory," said Bill Whitmar, director of the Missouri State Public Health Laboratory. "In collaboration with our

partners, this timely surveillance will help allow us earlier detection of emerging variants."

In partnership with researchers from the University of Missouri-Columbia, DHSS and the Department of Natural Resources are continuing their year-long efforts within the Coronavirus Sewershed Surveillance Project. Since June, the sewershed surveillance project has been testing community wastewater facilities weekly to detect the presence of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, to help inform disease mitigation efforts. In February of this year, the team was one of the first in the nation to begin conducting sequence monitoring of wastewater samples, which allows for identification of variant virus present. While not highly prevalent, their studies indicate the B.1.1.7 variant is present in samples collected from throughout the state. Sewershed researchers have said the project can provide early detection of an upcoming COVID-19 outbreak or emerging novel viral variants.

The **first Missouri case of the B.1.1.7 UK variant (https://health.mo.gov/news/newsitem/uuid/317d1d0e-e0cb-48e0-8dd9-45af463ca32b/missouri-dhss-reports-state-s-first-confirmed-case-of-b-1-1-7-covid-19-variant)** of COVID-19 was confirmed on Feb. 6 in northeast Missouri. While this remains the only confirmed human case of its kind in the state, epidemiologists say it is clear that this variant has been found in samples in various locations throughout the state based on this continued wastewater surveillance.

Even after a person is vaccinated for COVID-19, DHSS recommends individuals continue wearing a mask, using good handwashing, maintaining physical distance from others outside their household, and staying home if they feel ill.

For more information, visit the **sewershed surveillance team's storymap (https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/f7f5492486114da6b5d6fdc07f81aacf)**. The storymap contains an interactive map displaying sewershed trends and identifying those found to have a significant increase in the viral particles measured. The interactive map also identifies sewersheds with little to no change in the trend but remain elevated.

- **Health update (February 19, 2021): Enhancing Public Health Surveillance for Variant SARSCoV-2 Viruses in Missouri (https://health.mo.gov/emergencies/ert/alertsadvisories/pdf/update21921.pdf)**

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