



Vilas County Public Health Department

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Vilas County Public Health Department Q&A

Vilas County Public Health Department acknowledges that you may be concerned about the community or yourself, at this unknown and difficult time. We compiled questions and answers of the frequently asked concerns we have been receiving.

1. What does the Health Department do when a county resident tests positive for the COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019)?

Vilas County Public Health Department follows the guidelines set by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. We do “contact tracing” which means we contact the person who has tested positive and we find out every place that person went and who they were with during the time when they were infectious. With this information we then notify any individuals considered to be a close contact to the case, and instruct them to isolate themselves and track symptoms that may indicate COVID-19. We also contact any business that the case may have visited and provide guidance. If necessary, we would issue a press release to alert the public of possible exposure if the exposure took place in a public place (for example during a church service) and we felt that everyone in attendance needed the information. It is public health’s role to limit the spread of disease and we are making every effort to do so.

2. Why have you only reported the number of positive test results and not more of the information about the COVID-19 positive individuals? Other counties in Wisconsin report the city/municipality of residence.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) protects the private health information of all US residents. This law ensures that personal information that we share with our healthcare provider may not be communicated to family members, friends, employers, and the community at large without our permission. This federal law carries significant penalties for any person or entity that violates this law. The Vilas County Public Health Department is bound to uphold these privacy requirements.

Therefore, we are providing as much information on each positive case as we think is necessary. We do not list towns or municipalities because this is considered to be identifying information in Vilas County. The only reason to provide information such as a municipality, would be if there was an imminent need to protect the public. Fortunately, we have not had to do this. Even in emergency situations, we must continue to implement reasonable safeguards to protect patient information against intentional or

unintentional and impermissible uses and disclosures. We disclose information which is considered the “minimum necessary” to inform and protect the community.

3. But don't we need to know where people who have tested positive for COVID-19 live, so we can protect ourselves from getting exposed?

No. Individuals who have tested positive are now self-isolating, so they pose no threat to the community. The Health Department does not want to give anyone a false sense of security. Even though we have only had four positive cases, that does not mean that others in the community do not have COVID-19. There may be individuals who have COVID-19 but do not experience symptoms. Others may be in the early stages of the virus and not yet symptomatic. These individuals, who have not yet been diagnosed, have the greatest potential to infect others.

4. So how do I protect myself from those individuals?

We would like every resident to assume that COVID-19 is here in our county. That is why it is important to stay home and stay 6 feet away from others to protect yourself. Please continue to follow Governor Evers Safer at Home (Order #12) to protect yourself and others.

5. But I am still worried that I may have come in contact with one of the 4 people who tested positive for COVID-19. How can I know if I should worry about that?

The Health Department would have been in touch with you if you were determined to be a close contact. Close contacts are notified and instructed to isolate themselves and track symptoms that may indicate COVID-19.

6. Why does the Health Department collect so much information if you are not going to share it with the public?

Data collected from local health departments is used by healthcare providers, scientists, researchers, and governments in the short term to identify health needs and issues in each community. Long term, this information is used to study the diseases, treatments, and outcomes to establish preventative health measures.

In the future, please visit our Health Department's website at <https://health.vilascountywi.gov/> for current reporting of COVID-19 testing results.

Other Resources:

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/privacy.htm>

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