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Public health director assesses Northwest Georgia coronavirus situation

ROME, GA: Dr. Gary Voccio, health director for the ten-county Georgia Department of Public Health Northwest Health District, acknowledges there is now clear indication of community spread of COVID-19 in Northwest Georgia. “Everyone should operate under the assumption that there is transmission in your community already,” Voccio says. “Many people are going to get sick, but based on what we know about this virus, most people will not develop serious illness,” Voccio says.

“Our job now, everyone’s job, is to bear what we’re feeling and act to help protect ourselves and our communities. There’s going to be disruption to daily life, but we want people to feel empowered by this. The decisions you make will ultimately affect the trajectory of this outbreak. ”

Voccio reports that COVID-19 testing is only available at this time for those that are symptomatic and have been evaluated by a qualified healthcare provider. He also endorses the CDC’s recent recommendation to cancel events and large gatherings over fifty people and urges use of social distancing to mitigate spread of the virus and protect local communities.

“Avoid mass gatherings, which are being discouraged, and maintain at least six feet distance from others when possible. That’s the best advice to follow right now,’ Voccio says. “This means,” says Voccio, "no hugs, no handshakes. It's particularly important, and perhaps obvious, to maintain

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that same six-foot distance from anyone who is demonstrating signs of illness, including coughing, sneezing, or fever.”

Voccio stresses that some people are at higher risk of getting very sick from this illness, including older adults and people who have serious chronic medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease. These people and their family, friends, and caregivers should take special precautions.

Public health currently recommends that for the next eight weeks, organizers cancel or postpone in-person events that consist of fifty people or more. You can find CDC guidance here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/mass-gatherings-ready-for-covid-19.html>

Events of any size should only be continued if they can be carried out with adherence to guidelines for protecting [vulnerable populations](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/high-risk-complications.html), [hand hygiene, and social distancing](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html). When feasible, organizers could modify events to be virtual.

This recommendation does not apply to the day-to-day operation of organizations such as [schools, institutes of higher learning, or businesses](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/index.html) and is made to help reduce introduction of the virus into new communities and slow the spread of infection in communities already affected by the virus.

If you are at higher risk for serious illness from COVID-19 because of your age or because you have a serious long-term health problem, it is extra important for you to take actions to reduce your risk of getting sick with the disease.

“This seems to be a disease that affects adults and most seriously older adults,” Voccio says.  “Starting at age sixty, there is an increasing risk of disease, and the risk increases with age. The highest risk of serious illness and death is in people older than eighty years.”

“People with serious underlying health conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, or lung disease, also are more likely to develop serious outcomes, including death.” The CDC website has excellent guidance for people who

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are at higher risk for serious illness:  <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/high-risk-complications.html>

Voccio emphasizes that anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19, particularly fever, shortness of breath, and cough, should contact their healthcare provider immediately for instructions. “Please do not go to your healthcare provider without calling ahead,” Voccio urges. “Otherwise, if you’re sick, stay at home.”

For everything you need to know about COVID-19 and how to protect yourself, your loved ones, and your community, go to

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov> or <https://dph.georgia.gov>.

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**About the Georgia Department of Public Health Northwest Health District:** The Georgia Department of Public Health Northwest Health District works to track and prevent the spread of disease; promote health, safety, and wellbeing through education and communication; and prepare for, respond to, and ensure our communities are ready to handle public health emergencies, thereby improving the quality of life for individuals and families in ten northwest Georgia counties: Bartow, Catoosa, Chattooga, Dade, Floyd, Gordon, Haralson, Paulding, Polk and Walker. Our county health departments provide a variety of medical services; monitor area environmental safety, including restaurant inspections; and help ensure their communities are prepared for disasters. Find us on the web at [www.nwgapublichealth.org](http://www.nwgapublichealth.org). Follow us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/NCHD52/) to receive news, emergency messages, and health-and-safety information at [www.facebook.com/NorthwestHealthDistrict](http://www.facebook.com/NorthwestHealthDistrict)