



Executive Summary: Community Spread

September 5, 2020

As Portage County experiences a sharp increase in positive cases and having had [two county residents tragically pass away](#) due to the virus recently, the community is rightfully curious as to how the virus is spreading and where.

The reason that the Division of Public Health continues to tell the community that Portage County—like the rest of the state—has sustained community spread, is that *any* gathering has potential for spreading the virus. If the behaviors of those in attendance don't take a hard look at how best to mitigate risk, the odds are increasingly against you. In other words, human behavior is a primary driver to the spread of the virus. Period. End of story.

There are a number of scenarios that have generated so-called “clusters” of cases in Portage County. The events that seem to be most problematic are those that have an indoors component where enough measures are not taken to help lower the risk of people potentially encountering and spreading the virus.

A big source of cases—here and in most places across Wisconsin—has been [gatherings](#) of family and friends. That includes weddings, funerals, BBQs, parties, and even just a couple of families getting together for dinner. Sometimes, there does not seem to be any rhyme or reason to it, as small gatherings and large gatherings have both generated cases and not generated cases. However, the more people you have in a high-risk situation with no preventative measures or plan in place, the higher the odds become for disease transmission.

That said, the virus doesn't care about how and where it spreads. It will take the paths it finds, when it finds them. This is what viruses do, which is why we continue to remind everyone that the virus is present in our community and we have sustained community spread. You must assume that wherever you are going, there is a risk of spreading or being infected with the virus. So, take appropriate precautions. Anything short of that is going to provide you with a false sense of security and, perhaps, a positive test result.

There have also been questions about [contact tracing](#) and why close contacts are asked to quarantine and positive cases are told to isolate. These measures have major impacts upon individuals and businesses, but they are necessary to help slow down the spread of the virus, to “flatten the curve”, and to otherwise help our community. Still these impacts can have a dramatic impact on the local economy and business owners' ability to weather these storms. So, following best practices is also about helping the economy.

The nature of one's exposure is [what defines “close contact”](#), too. It's not simply being in the same area, but how one interacts with people that leads to the need to quarantine. So, if you're feeling sick, stay at home. If your symptoms persist, call your medical provider. There continue to be cases of individuals who are experiencing symptoms but think they only have a seasonal allergy or cold. By the time they get tested and discover that they are positive for COVID-19 they have created dozens of close contacts who must quarantine. So, if you're feeling sick, stay at home. If your symptoms persist, call your medical provider.

Wearing a mask is not a silver bullet, and some argue that an increase in cases during a mask mandate shows that the mandate is not working. Of course, one could also argue that the numbers could be worse if not for the number of people wearing a mask under the mandate. These circular arguments get us nowhere.

What we know is that wearing a mask does help to mitigate the spread of the disease. A mask alone can only do so much, though. This is why people are reminded on a daily basis to maintain social distancing, keep your circles small in order to minimize risk, wash your hands regularly, if you travel do so safely, and otherwise [take general precautions](#) that can help lower your risk as well as the risk of those around you.

It's incredibly frustrating to find ourselves in this unprecedented situation where difficult choices abound. It's important to recognize, too, that a prolonged pandemic like this also [generates cumulative stress and anxiety](#) that people are feeling and it is coming at us from many different angles.

Some of the challenges that we and the rest of the country are facing is that there continue to be issues with maintaining sufficient PPE, [having enough testing reagents](#), having enough tests to perform (on both symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals), and having consistent guidance from the federal and state levels.

What we can all do to help is to make the decision as individuals and concerned citizens that doing the right things for ourselves, our families, our friends, and our community during the pandemic is worth doing. If most of us can follow the guidance that has been out there for months now and [avoid putting ourselves into high-risk situations](#), we can continue to flatten the curve. If we decide that it's not worth doing those things, though, we will likely have more difficult days ahead.

As a reminder:

- Clean your hands often.
- Stay at home when you're sick (some people have not).
- Wear a mask. Some areas in the US with mask mandates [have seen a 46% reduction](#) in cases.
- Avoid close contact with others, especially those outside of your circle.
- If you have to travel, do so safely and plan ahead. Bring what you need to lower your risk.

Public Health officials across Wisconsin will continue to do all they can as we move forward, and please remember that many of the difficulties they have been facing are a result of the fact that counties have never been put into this position before. That's why we as county leaders and representatives are working so closely with our partners and peers across the state. The differences in resources and personnel that are available to public health departments across the state make working together the logical thing to do. Still, there are many people who think that not enough is being done and there are many others who think we are doing too much. Regardless of where you fall on that, helping to resolve this crisis sooner rather than later is in everyone's interest, and I sincerely hope we can all find our own sense of individual and social responsibility and do our part.

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