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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 3, 2021

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Highly Contagious B.1.1.7 Variant 'Likely Circulating Broadly' Locally; Officials Urge Caution, Vaccination

A recent spike in local cases of COVID-19 has been tied to the more infectious B.1.1.7 variant, sometimes referred to as the UK variant. Humboldt County Public Health officials urge county residents to protect themselves and the community by following COVID-19 prevention measures and getting vaccinated as soon as possible.

Routine genomic sequencing first identified the B.1.1.7 variant locally late last month, and eight more cases have been identified so far. Humboldt County Health Officer Dr. Ian Hoffman noted that this variant was likely circulating broadly in the community before it was detected.

"Our recent increase in cases shows just how contagious this variant is," Dr. Hoffman said, adding that it's believed to be the driver of significant outbreaks locally and around the country, most recently in Oregon and Michigan. "Until now, older adults experienced the most severe outcomes of COVID, but now we're seeing younger people getting sicker and younger people being hospitalized."

Dr. Hoffman said that the county has seen a rapid rise in hospital admissions believed to be due to the variant. Seventeen people were hospitalized with COVID-19 at one point last week, including several who were transferred out of the county and several who were younger than previously seen hospitalized, including one child in the 10-19 age group.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the B.1.1.7 variant is now the dominant strain of COVID-19 in the United States. This variant is associated with a 50% increase in virus transmission and potentially leads to more severe illness as well as hospitalizations and deaths in unvaccinated people.

While more study is needed, data from manufacturers show the vaccines to be highly effective at preventing severe illness and death from variants of COVID-19.

Genomic sequencing also found a single case of the P.1 variant, sometimes called the Brazilian variant. This case was first diagnosed in mid-April and was acquired through out-of-county travel. Dr. Hoffman said it does not appear to have spread beyond that initial case. "This individual followed isolation guidance when they returned to Humboldt, and contact tracers have not identified any other local contacts," he said. "This shows why travel is still risky and

that public health measures can help to contain cases when they're closely followed."

More cases of the B.1.1.7 variant are expected when results from additional genomic sequencing are returned in the coming weeks, but Dr. Hoffman urged the community to take action now. "Vaccination is the most effective tool we have to stop this disease, and now is the time to get vaccinated. Make sure to receive both shots of a two-dose series so you have as much protection as possible," he said.

"Given how easily this variant spreads, we still need to wear masks in public, maintain distance and do everything we can to avoid large gatherings, especially indoors, until more of us are vaccinated," Dr. Hoffman said. "Committing to these safety measures as a community gives us our best chance to contain this outbreak and to protect our friends and neighbors from severe illness."

Schedule an appointment at a Public Health vaccination clinic through [MyTurn.ca.gov](https://myturn.ca.gov) or through a local pharmacy at vaccinefinder.org

For the most recent COVID-19 information, visit cdc.gov or cdph.ca.gov. Local information is available at humboldt.gov or by contacting covidinfo@co.humboldt.ca.us or calling 707-441-5000.

Some Safeway, CVS Pharmacy, Rite Aid, Walgreen's and Walmart locations are offering COVID-19 vaccination appointments. See if there are appointments available at one of these locations by clicking on the links below.

Safeway: mhealthappointments.com/covidappt

CVS Pharmacy: cv.com/immunizations/covid-19-vaccine?icid=cv-home-hero1-link2-coronavirus-vaccine

Rite Aid: <https://www.riteaid.com/covid-19>

Walgreen's: walgreens.com/findcare/vaccination/covid-19

Walmart: walmart.com/cp/1228302

Sign up for COVID-19 vaccination: [MyTurn.ca.gov](https://myturn.ca.gov)

Vaccine Finder: [VaccineFinder.org](https://vaccinefinder.org)

Local COVID-19 vaccine information: humboldt.gov/VaccineInfo

Humboldt County COVID-19 Data Dashboard: humboldt.gov/Dashboard

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