



PACHC MEMO 20-01  
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Executive Management

February 27, 2020

**TO:** Chief Executive Officers of Pennsylvania Community Health Centers and Rural Health Clinics

**FROM:** Cheri Rinehart, President and CEO

**SUBJECT:** Coronavirus

**SUMMARY:** Media coverage about the novel coronavirus seems to be growing in intensity daily. It can be frightening to think about the threat, making it important that health centers serve as trusted sources of information on the issue for patients, staff and the communities you serve. Multiple health centers, realizing the important role they play, reached out to PACHC for information on this new virus and guidance on how to respond. The sources for the data, information and recommendations we offer are the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), Pennsylvania Department of Health and Johns Hopkins Medicine.

**BACKGROUND:** The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new virus that causes respiratory illness in people and can spread person-to-person. The virus was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China, and there are now [confirmed cases in 57 countries](#), including the U.S. While media coverage of the coronavirus is high, the risk of the disease here remains quite low.

#### **COMPARISON OF CORONAVIRUS AND THE FLU:**

With the fear generated by the continuous news cycles and social media on the coronavirus, it is important in allaying some of those fears to look at the coronavirus and the flu in comparison to one another. For example, to date there are 57 confirmed cases of coronavirus in the U.S. and no deaths; in comparison, there have been an estimated 29 million flu illnesses and 16,000 deaths this flu season.

Influenza (“the flu”) and COVID-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus, are both infectious respiratory illnesses. Although the symptoms of COVID-19 and the flu can look similar, the two illnesses are caused by different viruses.

#### **Similarities:**

- Symptoms
  - Both cause fever, cough, body aches, fatigue; sometimes vomiting and diarrhea

- Can be mild or severe, even fatal in rare cases
- Can result in pneumonia
- Transmission
  - Both can be spread from person to person through droplets in the air from an infected person coughing, sneezing or talking
  - A possible difference: COVID-19 might be spread through the airborne route (see details below under Differences)
  - Flu can be spread by an infected person for several days before their symptoms appear, and COVID-19 is believed to be spread in the same manner, but we don't yet know for sure
- Treatment
  - Neither virus is treatable with antibiotics, which only work on bacterial infections
  - Both may be treated by addressing symptoms, such as reducing fever; severe cases may require hospitalization and support such as mechanical ventilation
- Prevention
  - Both may be prevented by frequent, thorough hand washing, coughing into the crook of your elbow, staying home when sick and limiting contact with people who are infected

### Differences:

- Cause
  - **COVID-19:** Caused by one virus, the novel 2019 coronavirus, now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, or SARS-CoV-2
  - **Flu:** Caused by any of several different types and strains of influenza viruses
- Pennsylvania Incidence
  - **COVID-19:** No confirmed Pennsylvania cases to date
  - **Flu:** A total of 95,604 laboratory-confirmed influenza cases have been reported this season to date; confirmed reports were received from all 67 counties; the code for the geographic spread is 'WIDESPREAD' for week 8 that ended on 2/22/2020, which is the highest on a scale of five geographic spread levels
- Transmission
  - While both the flu and COVID-19 may be transmitted in similar ways (see the Similarities section above), there is also a possible difference: COVID-19 might be spread through the airborne route, meaning that tiny droplets remaining in the air could cause disease in others even after the ill person is no longer near
  - The incubation period for the flu is usually between one and four days; for COVID-19, two to 14 days
- Antiviral Medications
  - **COVID-19:** Antiviral medications are currently being tested to see if they can address symptoms
  - **Flu:** Antiviral medications can address symptoms and sometimes shorten the duration of the illness
- Vaccine
  - **COVID-19:** No vaccine is available at this time, though it is in progress
  - **Flu:** A vaccine is available and effective to prevent some of the most dangerous types or to reduce the severity of the flu

- Infection Rate
  - **COVID-19:** Approximately 80,410 cases worldwide; 53 cases in the U.S. as of Feb. 25, 2020
  - **Flu:** Estimated 1 billion cases worldwide; 9.3 million to 45 million cases in the U.S. per year, with 29 million cases to date this flu season
- Severity
  - This year's flu knows no boundaries for age, sex, or nationality
  - The coronavirus is not as severe to those who are infected except for the elderly with underlying medical conditions
- Deaths
  - **COVID-19:** Approximately 2,708 deaths reported worldwide; 0 deaths in the U.S., as of Feb. 25, 2020
  - **Flu:** 291,000 to 646,000 deaths worldwide; 12,000 to 61,000 deaths in the U.S. per year; in Pennsylvania, a total of 66 flu-related deaths have been reported to date for this flu season

**MEMBER ACTION:** Perhaps the biggest role health centers can play is to help calm fears by putting the risk into perspective. Other important roles include prevention and preparedness. Recommended actions include:

- Emphasizing the importance of good hand hygiene
- Consider incorporating new protocols into your check-in process that include a question on whether someone has recently travelled out of the country
- Review and update your emergency plan
- Connect with your regional emergency preparedness coalition and if you are unsure who the point of contact is, visit the Hospital Association [Emergency Preparedness Coalition website](#) or [email PACHC](#) and we will provide that information
- If you are not already signed up for Pennsylvania's Health Alert Network (PA-HAN), [register here](#); review the most recent PA-HAN alert [PA Dept. of Health PA-HAN 2-27-2020](#), COVID-19 Interim Guidance for Healthcare Professionals
- There are free resources available on the ECRI Institute website. ECRI has developed a [COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) Outbreak Preparedness Center](#) to help protect healthcare workers as well as patients. This site, which will be updated as new information becomes available, includes preparation and patient handling checklists, equipment and alternative supplier lists, patient care equipment evaluations, recommendations for infection control and links to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and World Health Organization.
- In Pennsylvania, the most accurate site for current information is the [Department of Health coronavirus webpage](#)

**PACHC ACTION:** PACHC will continue to monitor incidence and changes in recommendations and work with our emergency preparedness partners at the state to prepare should the course of the virus change and require a change in response. We will also offer regular updates in our weekly newsletter, *News CHCs Can Use*.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** For questions, contact Cindi Christ, COO, at [cindi@pachc.org](mailto:cindi@pachc.org) or (717) 761-6443, ext. 204.